

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a light blue, off-the-shoulder, floor-length gown with intricate lace detailing on the bodice, stands in a dark, misty forest. She is looking down and to her right. The forest is filled with warm, glowing fairy lights strung among the trees. The overall mood is magical and ethereal. The title and author's name are overlaid on the image in a classic, elegant font. Decorative floral motifs with red roses and gold leaves are placed in the corners.

KATHERINE MACDONALD

HEART OF THORNS

A BEAUTY AND THE BEAST
RETELLING

Heart of Thorns

A Beauty and the Beast Retelling

Katherine Macdonald



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"Beauty and the Beast"

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Illustration 1907 by Hazel Frazee

*“All have joined in one endeavour
To bury this poor thorn for ever.”*

--William Wordsworth--



Part One

Winter



Chapter One



Beast

I do not know what I truly look like. I wear the body of a monster, of this, any looking-glass will assure me. I am a creature of dark fur and fang and felt. My hands resemble paws. I have claws instead of nails. A thick tail hangs between my legs. I have searched in vain for another face like mine, but there is not one. I am part wolf, some have said. There is a little lion in my mane of sorts. Perhaps a bear in my shoulders.

Monsters. Things that would tear you apart.

There is that darkness in me, too, but most of the time, I am a man. There is another face, underneath this one, another, better, truer face, but I have never seen it.

There was a mirror in the castle that might have shown me, once upon a time, before the magic dried up. But in recent years I have always been too afraid to look, always too afraid that it might show me a monster still, and then I would know. I would know that there was no chance of rescue from this tortured shape.

I have worn it for as long as I can remember. As a child, I wore it like clothes, clothes picked out for me. I did not care, I had no choice. When I grew up, I came

to despise it. I wore it like a shackle. I was a prisoner inside, forced there by an evil fairy, to remain there until someone could love me for who I truly was.

Ariel, Margaret and Ophelia, my guardians, were still around then. Still here to offer me words of comfort and reassurance. But like all good things in this place, they too eventually vanished. I know they are still here because they must be. Because food still arrives, because there is still light—fickle and faint though it be.

I imagine the lights will die soon, and after that...

It has been three years since my last visitor, Grace, left. Her stay here was shorter than the others, and yet she was likely my favourite. I miss her. Partly for her person, but partly for any company, any voice other than my own. I fear it grows dusty from underuse.

A storm is brewing outside. It is odd for this place to show any semblance of weather, the garden as dry as a desert, but it is the solstice today, I think. The fog has rolled back a fraction. I will admit the temptation to go through it rises every time it opens, to stroll right into the nearest town. I would experience very little of it before some hunter shot me, no doubt, but at this point, it might be worth it. I long for real, true noise.

I open the music box beside me, but the tune is as melancholy as I am. I can rarely get it to play anything other than what I feel. I long for something else, but the music can only reflect my mood. I shut it painfully.

There is a sudden clash. Rain hurtles from the sky.

This never happens. There has been no rain here since I dried up the garden to help Grace escape. It can only be due to the solstice, although it has never done it before. Strange. I should try to enjoy it while I can—

“Hello?”

A voice pierces the silence, sure as an arrow.

“Is someone there?”

It cannot be.

I pause, waiting for it to vanish, for my senses to clear, but her voice echoes on. I stumble backwards, knocking into a table. The contents crash to the floor.

“Hello?”

The voice grows closer.

My first thought is to hide. If I can dash into the next room, there’s a door that leads back to the corridor. Perhaps I can get round her, escape before—

Before what? Before she sees you? Before she has a chance to scream and run?

I chance a glance out across the meadow. The fog is palpable, thick. The doorway is already closed. She will be here for another six months. I cannot hide from her for all that time, and yet—

I always hate this part, the introduction, having to deliver the news of their accidental imprisonment. It never gets easier. Grace was the most polite of the previous visitors, but when I told her that she wouldn’t be able to go home, that she was trapped here, that she would miss her wedding...

She sobbed all night long, so hard she seemed to shake the very bones of the castle. Who could ever get used to inflicting such misery upon a person?

I make a break for the door and skid into the other room, so quickly and so clumsily that I knock right into a chair and topple over. The visitor calls out again, quickening her gait. I groan, pawing desperately at the door. She walks into the room and I drop into the shadows, trying to disguise myself as best I can.

“It’s all right,” she says. Her voice is very calm, very soft. “I won’t hurt you.”

She, hurt me? Can she be serious? Perhaps I do not look so large from here. Perhaps she has mistaken me for some other creature.

Escape is not an option now that she has spotted me. I leap behind the chair instead. I find it helps when they don't see me immediately.

She steps a little closer. I spy her from behind the chair, through the gap in the back. She is dripping wet, her face cold and pale. Dark, damp hair pools out of her hood. I like the way she walks, with careful curiosity. That will soon change.

She spots me. Our eyes lock for a split second, before I turn away.

Then I see her eyes glance towards the poker by the fireplace. She is not foolish. She knows what I am.

"I won't hurt you," she repeats, now with a slight waver in her voice. "Come on... come out from behind there. Let me see you."

I groan and shake my head, struggling to speak. My voice has not been used in some time.

"I'm not afraid," she continues, "and you shouldn't be either. Won't you come out?"

I shrug, tense with defeat. It is now or never, I suppose. Gingerly, I step back from my shelter, into the murky light, and rise to my full height.

She does not scream. She does not run. There is the smallest of involuntary movements, a fraction of a gasp, a step back, but she stands firm, unmoving. She holds my gaze.

This is only the second time I haven't been screamed at, and the first I haven't been attacked. I can tell she is afraid. Her eyes are wider, her jaw tight and pale, but she does not scream. Even Grace screamed at first, and she was the kindest person I ever met.

"Oh, crickets," she says numbly. "You're certainly a strange-looking fellow."

I have never heard anything so unusual in my life. I almost laugh, although the sound comes out more like a sigh. I drop back down to my hiding place, gathering my courage. She will be scared, soon, any minute. I look up at her, just for a second, and savour what might be the last moment of fearlessness.

"I've had worse said," I return.

A sudden squeak escapes her. She knocks back into the wall, clasping her hand to her mouth, spitting out curses as she slides to the floor.

Screams. Any minute now.

Instead, she yells, "You... you can *talk!*"

This was not what I was expecting, but similar sentiments have been issued before. I've perfected the reply, here. "Quite well, so I'm told."

"You can *talk!*" she babbles. "You're talking!"

"Yes."

"But... but... but..." She stumbles on her words. "What are you? What... what is this place? Where am I? *Who are you?*"

I sigh, and she seems to shudder at the noise. "I am... only what you see," I tell her plainly. What else can I tell her? 'I am secretly a fairy prince, under a powerful curse, and you may be the only one who can release me'. I did try that before, actually. I told Grace when it was abundantly clear that nothing would happen between us, and Miranda. And Angelica.

Her response has stayed with me the longest.

"Who could ever love a monster like you?"

Miranda, shockingly, despite the fact she'd been openly rude to me before, softened a bit after that. I think she quite liked the idea of falling in love with a prince. But she quickly realised it wasn't going to happen.

"I wish I could love you, you know," she said shortly before she left. "You are a good person. Far better than I, I fear. But that would rather defeat the point, wouldn't it, if I loved you for what you could be, rather than what you were."

I will not repeat either mistake.

"As for this place..." I continue, bracing myself for the explanation, her realisation. "It is hard to describe. It is a hidden place, a place of... of a power all but faded. It appears in your world but twice a year, and then vanishes into the ether."

"I was in the field," she mutters, oblivious to what I have just imparted. "I was... in the woods, and then I saw this place, over the stream... You can't... you can't move a *castle*."

"And you cannot make a beast speak, and yet here I am."

"This... this isn't possible! These are the sort of things from... from *stories*."

"Stories," I say carefully, "must come from somewhere."

This is clearly too much for her. She sinks her head into her hands and breathes deeply. I count her breaths. I imagine she is trying to do the same.

"I'd like to go home now," she says eventually. Her voice is very quiet, almost childlike.

I shrink back into the shadows. If I thought waiting for the screaming was bad, this is worse. "I am so sorry," I say. "Truly, I am. For your sake. You will not be able to return tonight."

"What?" Her whole body freezes, shrinks against the door. "Why not?"

"The portal. The gateway between my world and yours. It has shut."

"When... when will it open again?" her voice trembles.

This is the worst part. I tell myself it will be over soon. "The portal opens but once or twice a year," I tell her, as gently, as honestly as I can. "I am sorry."

"No!" she shouts. "No, you're wrong!"

She stands there, half crouching, staring at me, as if my words will change if she can glare at me long enough.

"No," she repeats, her voice rising in panic. "No!"

She turns on her heels, bolting from the room. I call after her, telling her to wait, be careful, but she is almost out of the corridor. The noise of the storm intensifies as I stream after her.

I stop at the door and watch her flee into the fog, swallowed up by rain and mist. Perhaps I should let her go, let her learn that the way is closed. She needs to see that for herself.

But the storm is relentless, the skies almost black. She could get lost, she could get hurt. I dive in after her, the enormous sounds snapping at my eardrums. The wind wrestles against my cape. I can see her in front of me, like a dark flame, writhing against the fog. A tiny vessel in a storm. She is screaming, crawling at the air, searching with her hands and fists, as if she can feel it. As if she can fight fate.

I have known that battle all my life.

I keep my distance, waiting for her to realise. I will be there to guide her back to the castle, give her food and shelter and space. But she doesn't turn back. She keeps pressing forward.

The darkness intensifies. I am scared of losing her in it. I haven't seen a storm like this in many years. It is almost like something that Moya could conjure. I wonder if the girl has done something. The previous visitors all had a touch of the fey in them. Control of the weather is one of our gifts. Once upon a time, I could make the flowers bloom just by wishing it. But that was a time of more magic, more happiness.

Thunder rumbles, thick as blood. It pulses through me as she carries on, slower now, stiller. The air is heavier than before. Thorns pull at her clothes, and she fights to be free of them. I call out for her to stop, but she does not hear, or does not care.

Then her knees buckle, and she sinks to the ground. By the time I reach her, she is mumbling. I catch snatches.

“Freedom,” she mutters. Of course she wants to be free. She mutters other things, and then, most painfully, she calls for her parents.

I take off my cloak and wrap it around her shoulders. She is in no condition to move. There is no resistance, no acknowledgement, when I lift her into my arms and carry her back to the castle. It has been a long time since I touched anything alive, but I take no joy in this. Sometimes, I think, my curse is not as cruel as the cure. It is bitterly, wretchedly unfair of these poor girls to endure this torment for my sake.

Although, at least their sentence is only six months. Mine may be for life. And the ‘cure’ will kill me if it doesn’t save me.

I take her into one of the upstairs bedrooms, the first we come to. A fine guest room. Grace chose this one when I gave her the option. It is smaller than the others, perhaps a little more cosy.

I deposit her carefully on the grand bed. Her hands are bleeding, so I take a journey to the roof garden to collect some of the healing water that resides there. It is not very potent anymore, but I figure it will be better than nothing.

When I return, her wet clothes have already been removed, and her hands bandaged. She sleeps soundly under the covers as I deposit the music box beside her. I thank the fairies, not knowing if they are there, and douse her hands with the water. Then I light a fire—the fairies must be busy, or have expunged their magic for today—and leave her alone.

I’ve put her through enough for one day.



Sleep does not come easily. Emotions churn and tangle in my mind. There is the traditional sympathy, of course, the inevitable guilt. Then the fear, again, the nervousness. What will she think of me, tomorrow? Will she hate me, scorn me, curse me, ignore me? Will she be kind, angry, indifferent? Will she forgive me, befriend me, care for me?

It is too soon to hope, but never too soon to worry.

When sleep evades me still, I turn to walk the halls. They are just as gloomy as they always were, but when I turn into the dining room, I see the cobwebs have been swept away. The fairies are trying to make the place presentable again.

I do not want them wasting their magic, especially as there are two of us now, to cook for, make fires for, clothe and heat. I tell them this, but, as always, hear nothing. I grab a broom and continue what they’ve started instead, polishing the silver as best I can. Sweeping is easy enough with hands like mine. Polishing requires a little more dexterity than my paws can manage, but it is better than nothing. I decide to go and chop wood when I have done what I can. This is one task I have never done poorly. I often do not bother to heat the place myself, unless for light. With fur as thick as mine and nothing that resembles winter here, the cold is rarely bothersome. The girl, I reason, will want it warm.

I wonder what her name is.

Eventually, sleep comes. I make it back to my room and sink into my pile of furs and blankets. I should probably start sleeping in a bed again, acting a little bit

like the presentable human. Margaret would have a fit if she could see my current living quarters.

When I first started sleeping on the ground as a child, she would fret and fuss and hiss until I crawled back into bed. I often got too warm under the covers, but I grew used to it. But after three years of no company, I had slipped into some poor habits. Some days, I didn't even leave my den. What was the point?

I kept a routine for months after Grace left; I would wake at the usual time, breakfast, walk through the gardens, climb a tree, go for a swim. I chased animals when there were still animals to chase. Then I'd sit alone at the long table for lunch. I'd watch the world through the mirrors, until they stopped working. I would read, stare at an atlas, dream until the dreaming fell deaf. I read until my eyes hurt, till the words lost meaning. I would run through the corridors. I would sing, dance, try to learn an instrument. I tested the limits of the castle and grounds. I memorised every lock and bar. I knew my cage well.

And now, I need to learn to share it.

Chapter Two



Beauty

I was fifteen when the first guest arrived.

Though the gateway had opened twice every year for as long as I could remember, no one had ever drifted across it. The fairies had spoken about going out themselves and luring someone in, but none of them were keen on the morality of that especially when I was so young. Sometimes I would ghost the gateway, treading the fog, hoping for just a glimpse of another person. Not even to fall in love with them, but just to talk. I wanted other children. A real friend.

I did not go down that year. The first I knew of our guest was Ophelia crashing into the room so fast she tripped over, wings spasming with nervous energy.

“There’s... there’s...” Her vivid aquamarine eyes were wild, as if lit by something.

“Steady on, ‘Phelia,” Ariel sighed. “What’s got you in a tizzy?”

“There’s a girl in the castle!” she squealed, the words rushing out as one. She lifted into the air, twirling around the room, her short green hair flying out like a halo. She was a small, tiny thing. Part pixie, part nymph. Half the size of the others and a dwarf beside me, by then.

She flew around me. "Are you ready? I'm ready!"

I was overcome with an intermingling of hope and dread, so tangible I could choke on it. I felt like I was going to be sick.

Margaret leapt to her feet, patting down her brown curls and shaking out her skirts. She was the most ordinary-looking of my guards, a prim and stately woman of advanced years, even for one of the Fey. Only her owl-eyes spoke of her heritage. A syren.

"Hello?" a voice called from the foyer.

"I'll go and introduce myself," Margaret rushed. "You two... make him more... presentable. I'll try and explain the situation."

I think she thought to bring her to us, but despite over a decade to get used to this idea, we found ourselves completely unprepared. Ophelia brushed my mane, forcing me into a smart doublet. "Only one chance for a first impression!" she trilled.

"Be yourself," Ariel advised. "Be confident!"

"I don't think I can be both."

Ariel smiled, unusually warmly. She was the youngest of the three, a full fairy with yellow hair, green eyes, and glittering, golden wings. Her grin was pure mischief almost all of the time. "If she doesn't like you, that's her problem."

It was a nice sentiment, but she was wrong, of course. I needed her to love me. We all did.

"She's only the first," she continued. "Don't worry about making her love you. Just try to make a friend."

At these words, I felt my fears ebbing away. A friend, a friend! How long I'd wanted one of those for!

I picked up the pace, skidding into the corridor, racing out in the foyer to greet her. She stood below, a sweet, pretty girl in a powder-blue cape with flowers in her hair. Penelope.

"Hello!" I announced. "Nice to meet you, I'm—"

My name, underused and rarely spoken, was wrenched away from me by the sound of her scream. I didn't know people could scream like that when they weren't in pain, on and on, like the cascades of a waterfall.

I didn't know that screams could crawl under your skin, and shatter parts of you you'd never really thought about before.

I managed not to cry in front of her, but a few hours later, when she was safely ensconced in our finest guest room, it all came flooding out of me.

"It's all right," Margaret said, patting my hand. "She just doesn't know you yet. You can't blame people for their first reaction."

"Just give her a bit of time, she'll come around," advised Ophelia.

I lifted my head from the pillow, and turned towards the final fairy. "Ariel?"

"Nah," she said, "screw her. Pick one that doesn't scream at you."

"Ariel!" hissed Margaret.

"Look, I know he's not much of a looker by conventional means, but he's not *that* terrifying to look at! Any girl whose first instinct is to scream isn't worth his time. I don't know. Maybe I'm biased." She reached across and tugged my ear. "Whatever anyone says to you, no matter what they shout or scream, you are utterly adorable, kid. Don't let anyone make you feel otherwise."

It was easy to believe her, at first. But not forever. Not when the next one laughed when I told her what my name meant, and said she would call me "beast" instead. Not when she only looked me in the eye to insult. Not when the one after that avoided looking at me entirely.

Felicity didn't scream. She threw something heavy at me instead, before drawing the poker like a sword.

I liked her best of all, but not enough.

I have never liked anyone enough.

And they certainly have not liked me.



I sleep in, having been up so late, and rush to get dressed in the morning. I should invite the new guest down for breakfast, make her feel welcome, give her a tour. But when I arrive at her door, it is clear she has already left. My ears detect no sound from within, not a whiff of her.

My senses lead me towards the armoury, where I find her attacking one of the dummies. It became a favourite haunt of Felicity's after she discovered it, and decided she was going to spend her captivity learning how to fight. All the other girls ignored it entirely. Isabella headed straight for the music room when she emerged from her chamber. Penelope was drawn to the menagerie. None of them had ever been so bold as to pick up a weapon and start destroying things on their first day. It is a strange picture, this wild girl in a ballgown, wielding a blade with the strength of a warrior, a tangled surge of red-brown curls spilling down her back.

I summon my courage. "My, remind me never to anger you."

She jumps as she turns around, but she doesn't scream. She doesn't do anything but stare at me. She is not repulsed, but there is something else in her eyes. Anger, perhaps. She would not be the first to blame me. In fact, I'm half-surprised she doesn't turn the blade on me.

"Good morning," I continue, trying to sound as cheerful—as human and unthreatening—as it is possible to be, and trying not to look at the remains of the dummy. She really has done a number on it. "Has the world outside changed so much that all young ladies are now schooled in sword fighting?"

She continues to glare at me. "No," she says shortly.

This is going splendidly so far. She's an excellent conversationalist. My mind flails for a moment, struggling for something to follow.

"Then you must be a rare maiden indeed to... decimate a dummy so."

She says nothing to this either, but thankfully her belly fills the silence.

"You are hungry," I say, wishing I'd thought to mention food first. It would have been a better conversation opener than commenting on her penchant for destruction. "Allow me to offer you breakfast, at least."

She nods numbly, and I step away from the door to let her pass, giving her plenty of room. I guide her to the dining room, glad whatever remains of the fairies or their magic saw fit to clean this room in advance. It is still damp and dusty, but without the troves of cobwebs. The gold and white furnishings help elevate the gloom that infects most of the castle, as if colour was sucked away when the garden died. The air is filmy with underuse.

I pull out a chair clumsily and gesture for her to sit before springing away, letting her push it in herself. I hover by the side of the room, unsure of my next word, my next action.

"You'll find food readily available here, whenever you want it," I explain. "I do not know quite how it works, but it keeps me alive, so..." Partially a lie, although not much. I'm *still* unsure how they manage it. Still unsure if they're really still here.

She lifts her lid carefully, her expression betraying nothing as she eyes a hearty porridge underneath. Her fingers tremble as she lifts the spoon to her lips, as if her appetite has waned.

“You may go or do whatever you like here,” I tell her. “The castle is your...” I stop just short of saying ‘home’. I am not sure that would be a welcome word, not yet. “Yours to explore,” I finish. “That being said, the chamber at the end of the western corridor. The one with the gold door. Please refrain from going in there.”

“Why?” she asks. “What's in there?”

I try not to smile at her curiosity, and a joke slips out in place of any cautious thought. “The bodies of my former brides.”

I wait for her to startle, or laugh, or the look of abject horror... but it doesn't come. She merely blinks at me. “Well, I can understand you wanting to keep that hidden.”

“It's a... a personal request,” I add. “I would keep it to myself.”

Even after all this time, I want to keep Mother's room safe for her. I don't want it to be a spectacle.

“Your name,” I ask, realising I still don't know it, “what is it?”

“Rose,” she says quietly. “De Villeneuve.”

It is perfect, with her dewy skin and red-brown hair, like a rose made human. I want to tell her that it suits her, but I feel like any compliments would be unwelcome. Instead, I tell her, “You may call me Beast, for that is what I am,” and privately wish she'd ask for another name to call me by. No one has, not yet.

My given name was never used, everyone favouring pet names or my title as a child. It hardly feels like my own at all. But I should like to be asked it.

Rose looks down, and starts to nibble at her breakfast. She does not speak again.



Rose drifts away from the room after awkwardly stirring her porridge for a long while, managing only a few mouthfuls. She gives a slight nod of the head in lieu of a parting, barely looking at me as she makes her escape. I hover in her trail long after she departs, wondering if I should offer her a tour. A fine, quiet anger emanates from her, and I think the better of it. She's not crying. She's not shouting. Perhaps this is the best that I can expect.

Perhaps she will be like the second girl, Isabella. She barely spoke to me at all, occasionally tolerating my presence. She was not very afraid of me, she just hated me. The disdain poured out of her.

Still, I cannot shake the look in Rose's eyes, when she first beheld me. No horror, no hatred. Not even pity. Surprise, embarrassment, amazement, even. There had been no hatred then.

I shake it away, retiring to the library, rustling through an old favourite in an attempt to keep my thoughts away from her. It is not easy. I hear her footsteps in the corridors, and the air in the castle has shifted, as if breathing. Phantoms stir in the dust. The place is more dead for her living it.

I catch glimpses of her from the window at one point, drifting in the garden, a spot of red amidst the endless swirls of grey. The fog is thicker than ever, the desolation etched into every stone. The gardens look like a graveyard.

She retires to her room eventually. I know the castle will see to her needs, but she does not. I think of going to ask her if she needs anything, but I don't want to

subject myself to her possible wrath, or make her feel uncomfortable, like she owes me for any acts of kindness. That would not be fair.

For days, she avoids me, or I avoid her, as she slowly explores the castle, inch by inch. She takes her time, spending hours in every room, as if each were some kind of museum full of fascinating exhibits. She may well be mystified by the contents—I know nothing of her life at home—but I suspect that there is another reason for the snail's pace exploration; she does not want to run out of rooms. She does not wish to know the limits to her cage.

I remember a moment in my boyhood when I realised I knew everything about the castle, every concealed entrance, every hidden staircase, every folly and tree and bush and statue. There was nothing new. Nothing that could surprise me. It was hard to love it as much as I once had after that, once I realised it was my prison, and not just my home.

Once I knew it could well become my coffin.

I leave her to her wanderings, occasionally watching her from the shadows as she passes by, wondering which one of us is the ghost.

After a week, she has explored most of the rooms to one side of the castle, and her attention finally turns to the ballroom... the throne room. Even in its abandoned state, its grace and elegance shimmer through the cascades of ivy, the swatches of white and the tiny flashes of gold peering through the foliage. It has never quite gained the grey, grainy quality of the rest of the castle. Never quite lost a sense of life.

At the end of the room, in a melted heap, sits the remains of my mother's throne, and behind her the scorched portrait of her and my father. I often come in here to stare at the way their hands touch, especially as the other means I had to watch them by have long since evaporated. In this still palace, this desecrated image is all I have left of him.

Rose stands in a patch of sunlight, wearing a deep blue gown that is unlaced at the back. I can see her bare flesh spanning out from her shoulders and spine. The strangest, faintest urge to tug the end of one of her curls flutters up inside, but I stick to the shadows where I belong, uncertain where that bubble of familiarity came from.

She half-raises her hand towards the portrait. "What happened here?"

The sound of her voice breaks the glassy silence. I am stunned by it, so much so that it takes me a moment to realise she is talking to me. I peer out from behind my pillar. "I'm sorry, are you talking to me?"

"Is there anyone else here for me to talk to?" she asks pointedly.

"No," I say quietly, hanging my head, "I suppose not."

"You suppose?"

"The magic that sustains this place... what little there is left of it... it was alive once. I do not believe it is, anymore."

I think longingly of Ariel, Margaret and Ophelia. Of what they are now, if anything. It has been so long since they fell silent, since they vanished completely. If they were alive—truly alive—I was certain they would let me know.

Sometimes, I thought I heard them. The faint tinkling of bells. A glimmer in the corner of my eye. But nothing else.

They had been incorporeal too long to ever return. I was almost sure of it.

Rose looks at me. "So... what *did* happen here?"

"A great battle was fought," I explain, careful not to reveal too much. I want to satisfy her curiosity. I want to talk to her. But I have learned the hard way not to let them know what I truly am. "Between light and darkness."

“Who won?”

“Neither. In the end, both parties destroyed one another, and this place along with it.”

“Why does it appear in my meadow twice a year?”

“It doesn’t,” I reply. “It can appear in many places, all over the world. It’s just by chance it appeared to you.”

“Then why does it appear at all?”

To give me a faint chance of one day being free. But, of course, I cannot tell her this.

“Old magic,” I settle on. “It has rules that must be followed. Every curse cast must have a chance of being broken.”

“Every curse?” Her eyes light up. I notice, in the gathering light of the morning, how green they are. Not like gemstones. Something more natural, like a meadow swamped by sun, or the distant hills at dawn. They’re almost fey, especially when they flicker, sparked by awe. “This place is under a spell?”

I would have thought that much was obvious, but I humour her. “It is not merely a castle.”

“What else is it?”

“A prison.” The word escapes me before I can claw it back. She balks at me, and I wonder if I’ve said too much. If she’ll figure it out. After all, who else is imprisoned here but *me*?

“How... how long have you been here?”

“My entire life.” My voice is very light, waiting for her to ask something else I cannot answer. “I know no other home but this.”

“But if the way opens twice a year—”

“Somehow I do not think I would be too warmly received in your world.”

Something moves in those green-glass eyes of hers, an emotion I cannot discern. “You have not been alone here all this time?”

I shake my head. “There were survivors, after the war. Loyal servants. They were my constant companions for many years. Then the magic that sustains this place began to wane. They sacrificed themselves to ensure it didn’t fade completely, becoming part of the very walls.”

“Have you been alone since then, or have other people found their way in?”

“Seven, including you. But not one for almost three years.”

For a moment, she says nothing. I half expect that to be the end of the conversation. It’s an abrupt end, but she is bored of me now. Perhaps she thinks I’m trying to guilt her into conversing with me, and is having none of it.

“What do you do?”

I was not expecting this. “I’m sorry?”

“How do you fill your time?” she asks.

“I er, I mean, sometimes...” I don’t think I’ve ever been asked this before, and I’m surprised she’s given up asking about an enchanted castle to ask instead about my past times. “I suppose I walk a lot, and I used to hunt and fish, back when there were animals, and, um, well, I read a lot.”

“You read?”

“I know, it may sound—”

“No, no. I love to read. I was hoping—I’d not managed to locate it yet—but I’m supposing there’s a library here somewhere?”

The smallest twitch of a smile escapes me. Not one large enough to be at all frightening, or so I hope. I can’t help it either way. “A library, you say? That I can help you with.”



Reading. *Reading!* She could not have said something better. If there was one thing I loved to do, it was reading. Mother taught me to read, back when she still had a voice and a reflection, and the fairies continued my education long after she went. I can barely remember not being a reader, not being able to peel back the pages of a book and slip away. Aside from the mirrors, it was the greatest escape I had, and books never stopped working. They were always there.

The library is also one of my favourite rooms in the castle. I love every inch of it; the tall bookcases, the smell of wood and paper, the red walls, the blue painted ceiling, the enormous sculpted tree. The faint reminder of nature existing, even in a place like this.

I make sure to catch Rose's reaction as I fling open the doors. Her face breaks into wonder, and I know, in that moment, that she loves it just as much as I do.

"It's beautiful," she breathes, her eyes sparkling.

I try not to smile at her as she gazes around at the little balconies and spiral staircases, the books in every colour imaginable, stacked fifty feet high. She is clearly enraptured. "Do you like it?"

"It's perfect," she exhales. "Thank you."

I have never met someone with such a reaction, never met anyone whose love of books clearly rivalled my own in a single glance. "I shall leave you then," I announce. "Enjoy your reading."

I do not want to leave, but I think she will enjoy some solitude, a moment or two for herself. I do not get very far before she speaks again.

"How many have you read?"

Her question beats against my chest, not just because I always, *always* love being asked questions about books, but because *she* has asked it. She has stopped me from leaving.

I answer her quietly, almost too scared to grasp at the question, at the chance of friendship, lest it be snatched away by a breeze. "Almost every book here."

"Almost every single one?" she sounds incredulous.

"Well, some of them were very dull—"

"That's so many!"

"I didn't have much else to do."

That stops the conversation for a little while. I wonder what she feels, at this confession. Guilt? Sympathy? Her face is inaccessible.

"Well, which one is your favourite?" she asks.

"My favourite?" I have never been asked before, although I know the answer myself. There are many I enjoy, many I love, but one I keep returning to, time and time again. I discovered it one summer years ago, reading the entire thing in a single sitting beside the lake. I felt like years had passed by the time I emerged, not because the book was too long, but because I felt every agonising year the characters experienced alongside it. "This one," I say eventually. I turn to a shelf beside the fire, right at the bottom, pull out a tome. *Tromeo and Lessida*. It is the story of two very different people, from very different worlds, who come to understand—and love—each other in a way that no others can. Their lives take them in very different directions, but I was always so enthralled by the affection that they held for one another. It was also beautifully written, poetry crafted into prose.

Rose looks a little surprised by this revelation. Her face crinkles into a frown. "Tromeo and Lessida? It's a love story!"

"What of it?" I am not sure I like her disbelief. Why should it not be my favourite?

"I just... I never really thought—"

"A curious choice for a monster, I suppose?"

"A curious choice for a *man*."

A silence passes between us. It is not an uncomfortable one, but strange and new. Her face is so serious, so utterly bemused by the idea that I—a *man*—could enjoy such a tale. It's like she's forgotten I'm a monster at all. It's so funny, that I break out into laughter.

Rose stares at me like I'm insane. I stop immediately. I've been told my laugh can be very alarming.

"Sorry," I say quickly, straightening my clothes. "Where—where would you like to begin?"

Rose points to one of the busts on a nearby desk. It is of a strange, warty little gnome with pointy ears. "I cannot help but notice," she starts, "that the past occupants of this castle... don't appear fully human?"

"That is correct."

"What were they?"

"They are what is commonly referred to as the Fey."

"What's that?"

"A group of conscious, highly intelligent, long-living beings, including but not limited to fairies, sprites, brownies, elves, pixies, dwarves, goblins, gnomes—"

"Those all exist?"

"You don't sound too surprised."

"Well... I do live in an enchanted castle inhabited by a talking self-proclaimed beast."

"Touché." I glance around the room. "I could find you a book on them, if you like?"

"Oh, yes please." Her voice is very light, almost giddy.

I spring onto a nearby bookshelf and race towards the ceiling. This is my domain, my playground. I know it better than I know myself. Each volume is a memory.

I pull one out, looking down at Rose. "Can you catch?" I ask.

"Yes, but—"

I hurl one down towards her and leap to the next shelf. There is another here on pixies. "Look out!" I call.

I skim through the next shelf, firing down anything I think she might enjoy.

"You'll break the shelves!" she calls up. "Or the books!"

She clearly does not know me and this library. There is a faint, blossoming hope that she will one day. That if we already have this in common, something can grow from it.

I cease my search for a second to stare down at her. "Nonsense," I assure her. "I've been climbing these shelves for years. And I'm very careful with the books." I wouldn't harm them. I'm aware of how pathetic it sounds, but they are the closest things I have to friends. I wonder how Rose feels about them? I didn't ask, I was so desperate to please her by finding something she liked. I should ask her why she reads. To escape, to immerse, to entertain? I throw another book over my shoulder, pondering the thought.

I hear Rose cry out.

Oh, oh no...

She clutches her forehead, books scattered around her feet. I drop down immediately, so hard that the floor seems to rattle. One of Rose's eyes is closed, the other blinking out tears.

"Oh my... are you all right?" I gush. "I'm so sorry, I didn't look before I... I'm sorry—"

Why didn't I look? How hard would it have been? What have I done? *Idiot, idiot, idiot...*

"No, no, I'm all right," she insists, taking her hand off briefly. "I'm not bleeding, just a bruise—"

"I can get you something—"

"I'm fine!"

I pay no attention to her. There is no way I can stand there and watch her in pain, knowing I caused it. Never mind that it's just a bruise. It could have been worse. The wounds I inflicted on the fairies, my guardians, my friends... so much worse.

I storm up to the roof terrace and gather a cup of the waters there, before heading to the infirmary for a cloth. I try to measure my breathing, control my fury. Nothing works. When I head back to the library, I almost want to slam the cup down on the desk and storm off again. Or throw myself against a wall. Over the top, perhaps, but it's how I feel.

Instead, I set the cup down on the table, carefully as I can, and jump back. I don't want to hurt her again.

"I really am very so—"

"You say sorry too much," she snips, taking up the cloth.

"Keep it on for a few moments."

"Sounds like good advice."

I shift back and forth on my paws for a minute, and then my eyes settle on the pile of books she has stacked up.

"I'll take these to your room." I try to make it sound like an offer, but it feels more like a demand.

"You don't have to—"

"It's fine."

I sweep them into my arms, and then sweep out of the room.

Chapter Three



Snow

She calls out thank you into the empty corridor, after I leave her books. Calls out thank you to a monster. I'm not sure who's more of a fool here, her or me.

"It was an accident," I hear Margaret saying. "Accidents happen. What is important is learning from them."

I looked at Ophelia in the next room, pale and clammy, trying not to scream as Ariel straightened out her wing to apply the ointment.

I *did* learn from them. I learnt that I was dangerous. I learnt that my teeth could hurt. I learnt that I needed to stay away.

Ophelia forgave me almost immediately. I don't think I ever forgave myself. Her wing recovered, but until they vanished completely, I could always see a slight line where I had snapped it. I could see the memory of the pain I caused, irreversible, unforgettable.

I was a monster after all.

I stalk the grounds for the rest of the day, avoiding her, even when she dithers in the dining room as though waiting for me to appear. She retires to her chamber early, but sleep evades me. I am too angry with myself, my frustrations and hope

churned up like muddied snow. I walk the corridors even as darkness pools into them.

A cry cuts into the hall, slicing through the silence. It is a muffled, strangled gasp, like breath being wrenched from you. I race towards Rose's room, claws clattering on the marble, but stop just before her door.

"*I am not afraid,*" she rushes. "Not afraid!"

A nightmare, almost certainly. I wonder if I should disturb her, if she wants any company, least of all mine. But I think how much I have craved someone—anyone—all of these years, and think I'd prefer to have the choice rather than nothing.

I knock gingerly. "Rose?"

She takes an age to respond. "Yes?" Her voice is faint.

"I was just... walking by and I heard... are you all right?"

"Yes," she replies, pausing again. "It was... just a nightmare."

I am almost certain there is more to it than that, but I dare not pry. "If you need anything—"

"I'm fine!" she snaps.

I try to swallow my sigh. "As you wish." I turn and disappear down the corridor. I should not have asked. I wonder if it's me she's afraid of.

After all, what else could she be hiding from?



The next morning, Rose starts redecorating. She takes down several of the gaudier paintings, rolls up the rug, strips the curtains from the bed and replaces everything with something lighter, softer, more ethereal. I half expect the carved roses on the bedposts to start blooming.

I like that she's making the place her own, and I hover about the corridors, just out of sight, wondering if I should ask if she needs assistance.

She wanders into one of the bedrooms, dumping off an armful of spare cushions. I hear the sounds of her pulling something heavy. I'm halfway in when she calls out.

"A little help would be nice!"

I don't know who she's talking to, but the dresser shifts forward suddenly. She shrieks and topples backwards. For a moment, I think I see a flicker of something around it, like the embers of a fire. But I must be mistaken. Wishful thinking.

Rose mutters a thanks to the air, getting up and brushing the dust off her clothes. She tries to pull it again, to little avail.

I creep forwards. "Do you require some assistance?"

She leaps into the air. "You must stop doing that!"

"I'm sorry!" I scuttle back into the corner, ashamed of my proximity. "I heard you moving around and thought—"

"No, it's fine, I do need some help, actually..." she says, eyes darting everywhere but me. "You can move *really* quietly."

"I've been told."

"Well, now that you're here..." She points to the dresser. "Would you mind?"

I nod, striding towards it and lifting it into my arms. Lifting is something I can do, one of the few positives to this form. "Your room?"

"My room."

We walk back to it in silence and swap over the pieces in similar fashion. A glance around at the changes. "Making this place your own, I see."

"That is the intention. Put the old dresser by the window, will you?"

"The window?"

"Yes."

It seems an odd place to put it, but I follow her instructions. Once it's positioned, Rose uses the dresser as a platform and clambers up on top of it, standing on tip-toe to take down the old curtains. She balances precariously, her feet close to the edge. She's wearing slippers that look like they're made of petals.

"Are you... do you want me to do that?" I ask.

"Alas, I think this calls for defter fingers..." she says, not looking at me. She takes off the first curtain and throws it down to me in a flurry of dust.

I barely contain my sigh, thinking of my huge paws and the things I cannot do. "I suppose you are right. I am just concerned you might fall."

"Then I fall. I shall not break."

I have every intention of catching her if she does fall, because even if she isn't breakable, it's going to hurt, and I don't want to see her hurt. Humans are not as strong as fey, or whatever I am.

She takes off the second one. "Could you pass me the ones on the bed?"

I do so, the fabric pooling down like liquid starlight. Rose stands back to admire them, her heel slipping off the dresser. Half a scream leaves her mouth before she crushes into my open arms. She clutches my shoulders in fright.

"Are you... all right?"

Rose tenses, avoiding my gaze. Her eyes look at the floor. "Fine," she says shortly.

I ought to put her down, but I'm overwhelmed by the fact that even though she isn't looking at me, she isn't wriggling away, or shuddering at my touch. She's not horrified.

But she's not comfortable.

She swallows. "You can put me down now."

"Right. Of course."

I slide her to the floor carefully, taking several steps back, ashamed of holding onto her too long, of making her feel awkward with my own stupid desire to be close to someone again.

"The room is looking lovely," I say quickly, to dispel her awkwardness as well as mine. "Are you done with the furniture?"

"Yes," she says.

I nod, lifting up the old dresser to take it away. It is only later I realise she probably needed help doing the second window too, but I'm too embarrassed to return.



She dithers once more in the dining room at dinner time, but I do not go to her. I wonder if I should apologise for not putting her down faster. I wonder how she feels. Did she find me horrifying, or revolting, and her tension was how she contained it? She didn't scream when she first saw me. I know she is very fearless. Maybe she was just being polite.

The whisper of easiness between us as I assisted her with the curtains seems a long time ago, but I fixate on it all through the night, wishing I could grasp the

moment between my fingers like the pages of a book.

I long to hear the others' voices again. They would be able to advise me on how best to proceed. They were good at that. Here, I am quite out of my depth. I try to think about what they would say, if they were here.

"Be yourself," would be Ariel's advice. "If she doesn't like you for you, don't bother with her."

Ariel was always my favourite, but she could be very abrupt. And, as I pointed out to her once or twice, I was an enormous beast. That was bound to put off a few people.

"Be yourself... with manners," Margaret would insist. "Flatter her. Attempt to be a gentleman."

Ophelia's advice would probably be the worst to follow. "You could try smiling?"

I've once made a person scream by smiling at them. I am loath to repeat this mistake.

I doze off in my nest beside the fire, dreaming of their advice, and Rose's face looking at mine with something other than disdain.



There is a strange quality to the light when I wake up, a whiteness different from its usual emptiness. I move to the window to open the curtains fully, unsure how the gap appeared in the first place. I was certain I closed them last night.

The gardens are carpeted in perfect, pristine whiteness.

Snow.

A giddiness grips me of a strange kind, once familiar but made foreign by all the years it has been since I last felt it. I am a child again, tearing around a garden made magical by frost. I am a giggling bundle of delight in Ophelia's arms as she summons a sled and we race down the slopes, Ariel pelting us with snowballs. We'd spend hours in that glistening wonderland, the fairies building structures with their magic, Margaret enchanting hot chocolate to glitter and soothe.

The memory, the joy, makes me fearless. I barely remember to dress before racing down the corridor to Rose's room and hammering on the door.

"Rose! Rose, wake up!"

There is the murmur of someone inside, something shuffling.

"Rose!"

"Coming..."

She appears in the gap a moment later, still in her nightclothes with her dressing gown undone. It is a thin, silken thing, open at the neck and displaying far more leg than I spotted the other day with the dresser. I can imagine every inch of her with a vision so vivid that it catches me off guard.

"You bellowed?" she says groggily, unaware of her appearance.

I turn around so abruptly that I actually skid. "You're—you're not dressed."

Of *course* she's not dressed. It's early. I didn't even think—

"It is seven thirty in the morning," she says. "You woke me up."

"I—! I'm so terribly sorry. I didn't think to look at the time. I, um, apologise profusely—"

"Calm down. You can only see a spot of ankle. Honestly, you'd think I was naked."

Naked. I swallow, hotness filling me. "Sorry, I'm just not used to seeing a lady in her undergarments—"

"Well, you may have to get used to it if I am to be stuck here." She closes the dressing gown. It doesn't help a great deal. "Now, what's so urgent?"

"I wanted to show you..." My eyes drift around unconsciously. "I'm sorry, would you mind getting dressed?"

She groans, and closes the door in my face.

"Is that a no?"

"That's a 'give me a minute'." It takes barely any time at all for her to wriggle into her own dress and boots, her hair sticking up at all ends. "Ready," she says.

"Excellent!" I try not to jump, and don't really manage it, tearing down the corridor on all fours, quite forgetting myself. "This way! Come on!"

I reach the end of the hallway and stop at a full length window, pulling at the curtains. Bright, white light pools across the marble. "Look, look!"

Rose steps up behind me, peering out into the white. "Snow," she says, under her breath.

My tail wags of its own accord. I can't help it. It thumps against the wall. "*Winter*, Rose! *Winter*!"

"I can see that."

"Don't you know what this means?"

"No."

"We haven't had a season here for years. Years! And now you're here and—" I stop. It can't be a coincidence, surely, a modicum of magic returning shortly after she arrives? Maybe she has some power, like the others. Or maybe... maybe she just brought a little of the weather with her.

She blinks at me, thoroughly unimpressed. "And?"

"AND THERE'S SNOW."

"Great."

"I'm going out in it."

"I'm not."

Perhaps I should be disappointed. It would be nice to have her company. But I suppose snow isn't the luxury for her that it is for me. I refuse to let my spirits be dampened. Not today.

"Suit yourself," I say, and whiz off without her.

The sharp air strikes my chest as I hit the outside, sucking the breath from my lungs, but a quivering warmth rises within me. I am unused to delight.

The trees are frosted with snow, icicles dangling from the branches. The gardens are alive with glitter.

I dive face first into the snow and roll around it, savouring the texture of the ice, the coolness. I drift through the space, admiring every iced surface, every covered statue. Even my monstrous footsteps look pleasant against the untouched whiteness. My cage has expanded.

For hours, I walk and hum and watch, before deciding to build a snowman. The fairies used to conjure all manner of sculptures back when they had forms, and my large hands struggle with recreating anything of their ilk.

A while later, Rose exits the castle, a red spot in the distance. I try to concentrate on my current task; I do not want her to see how glad I am that she's decided to join me.

"Hello!" I say, when she reaches my side. "I'm building a snowman!"

She glares sceptically at my pile of snow. "Do you even know what a man looks like?"

"I've seen pictures." I've never seen a man outside of an illustration, sculpture or mirror. My father died before I was born, and the only visitors have been women.

Rose sighs, kneeling beside my pathetic attempt. "Roll a large snowball," she instructs.

"A ball?"

"Yes."

It takes a little while, but eventually, our man begins to take shape. I am no good with the defter jobs, so I merely deliver the snow to Rose and she pats it into place. The arms of the man are an easy task, too—I simply snap the branches of an obliging tree. Rose, meanwhile, digs into the path to find stones for the buttons and eyes.

It doesn't look much like a man to me. It is a bit lumpy, truth be told, although Rose seems pleased with our efforts.

"This doesn't look like a man," I tell her.

She glares at me. I am learning that glaring isn't necessarily a bad thing. She doesn't do it meanly. At least it's easy to read her when she glares. "It looks like a snowman," she says pointedly. "What were you trying to make, a marble sculpture?"

"Something like that."

Rose unties her scarf and loops it round the snowman's neck.

"No," I say quickly, unravelling hers. "Use mine."

"Won't you get cold?"

I fix her with a quizzical look. "I'm covered in fur."

"Then why wear a scarf in the first place?"

"Because that's what people do when they go out in the cold."

"But..." She stops for a moment. "Why do you care what people do?"

"It has come to my attention that most people care what other people do."

"You're not most people."

I regard her steadily for a moment. "Apparently neither are you."

"What makes you say that?"

"You don't like what other people like," I tell her. "You don't seem concerned about fitting in."

"I don't like trying to fit in," she says. "Actually, that's not entirely true. It's nice to fit in. I just don't think it's worth being someone else to do it. If you have to pretend to be somebody else to feel like you belong... you don't really."

Her words are those of a much older person, someone who has experienced more in life than most youth. I think back to my earlier statement. She is not like most people, because she is not afraid of what people think of her. I wish I had that confidence.

"Where did you read that?" I ask her.

"That one I learned myself."

There is more there, I think. That lesson was learned from somewhere. I wonder what it must be like, not to care what others think, not to be clamouring for a place to belong. I am not sure that sort of life would be less lonely than mine. I wonder who her friends are, who her family is. She has shared so little of herself.

I want to know more about her. The family still seems to be a sore spot, but I'm curious about her friends. I think back to her comment about belonging. Did she feel like she belonged there, in her town? Or is she, like me, searching for her place in the world?

It's getting close to lunch time. Her stomach rumbles loudly. "Will you eat with me?" she asks.

I think about refusing. I make quite a spectacle at meal times, but I'm charmed by her offer. Charmed, and flustered. It's the perfect opportunity to learn

more about her, and I nod before an excuse can be formed.

We walk back to the castle together.

“Have you got a mate back home?” I ask.

“I’m sorry?” she splutters.

“You know, a sweetheart, a lover. The last visitor here had a fiancé... I felt exceptionally bad about that.”

So bad I sacrificed an entire garden to send her back to him, a cost that felt worth it at the time, and wondered a year later if it had been.

Rose’s face stills. “I have a Papa, a Nanny, two brothers and two sisters,” she tells me. “No young gentleman callers. Not unless...”

I raise an eyebrow, at the same time noticing how her mother is absent from the list.

“Well...” Her mind seems to wander away for a moment, stirred into some reverie. Her pause suggests that there is someone who falls under that category, but her reaction at my earlier question gives me a little hope.

“I kissed a friend of mine a few weeks ago,” she tells me. “But he isn’t my sweetheart.”

“Oh.” I stop walking for a moment, a little stunned by the frankness of her confession, this nugget of information about her. “Not a good kiss?”

“Not enough fireworks,” she concludes. There’s a ghost of a smile there, and although it is not directed at me, the sight warms me nonetheless. She runs on ahead, kicking up snow, and I sense that I am meant to follow.

I chase her up the steps, my chest warmed with far more than exercise.



I am not sure how I feel about the story Rose told me, about her friend that she kissed. It is no business of mine what she does, or has done, I only asked because...

Because I wanted to know if she had anyone back home. I wanted to know if there was anything, a sliver of affection, that she could possibly bestow on me.

I wanted to know if it was all right for me to like her.

Do I like her? It seems early in the day to form any kind of attachment, but it’s easy enough to say I enjoy her company.

I could like her. I could like her quite easily. Love is another matter.

I shelve the thought, but my chest is still tight with it. Rose chats politely throughout lunch before going back to her rooms, after exacting a promise from me to have dinner with her later.

When dinner time comes, the room is cleaner than ever, and laid out only for the two of us. Rose appears in a gown of crushed red. In the light of the fire, she looks like a flame, burning steadily into the night. We retire to the library afterwards, and she picks up a book and slides to the rug beside the hearth.

She flicks her gaze towards me. “Have you read this one?” she asks.

I scan the title. “A long time ago,” I tell her. “I don’t remember it that much.”

“It’s an old favourite,” she says, cracking it open.

“Oh?”

I wait for her to say more, but she is gone, lost between the pages of a book, to surface only when the story is over. I want to peel her out of there. I want to ask her why she’s so enraptured, to have her share that world with me.

But I’m also certain she’ll bite my head off if I do.

I’ll have to wait until she emerges.

We read in silence until the clock chimes ten, and she jolts out of the book.

“It’s late,” she rushes. “I should retire to bed.” She gets up, her face golden in the firelight. She brushes down her clothes. “Goodnight, then,” she says, as if waiting for me to say something else.

The smallest of smiles slips past me. “Goodnight, Rose.”

Chapter Four



The Lake

Days go by in this fashion. We meet every morning in the dining hall, breakfast, play in the grounds, lunch, and usually retire to the library for the afternoon. We only spend a few hours apart each day. I offer her a tour of the castle, but she seems to prefer to wander on her own, exploring at her own pace.

I am eager for her company, and increasingly glad for the evenings which we pass beside the fire, losing ourselves to literature. She is not the first to enjoy reading. It was the only thing Penelope and I ever spoke about. Felicity loved books about travel. Grace too, enjoyed a cosy romance.

But Rose doesn't just read, she vanishes. The rest of the world melts away for her whenever she's sucked in. I remember exactly where I was when I first read a book, like I was meeting a fascinating stranger. I wonder if Rose is a bit like that too, aware that books are far more than paper and ink.

I'm glad she arrived only a couple of days after the last full moon, that I have another two weeks of reading beside her, long into the night, before I need to make my leave, else risk her knowing just how much of a monster I can be.



One morning, I wake and see that the lake has finally frozen over, and am struck by a sudden idea. I raid one of the rooms searching for a pair of skates, finally finding something that looks like they might be the right size. I hurry along and offer them to Rose.

“Here,” I say, brandishing them in her face, “I found these for you. They should be about your size.”

“What about you?” she asks.

“Oh, I really don’t think they’ll fit.”

She snorts at this. It is such a funny, ridiculous sound. Her whole face splutters into laughter. It is the first time I have seen her so at ease, so herself. Even a little happy.

I cannot help but smile back, even though I know my smile can be very frightening. For a brief, fraction of second, I imagine she is returning my smile, but then it drops suddenly and I know it was just wishful thinking.

“Sorry,” she says.

“By all means, laugh.” I chew my lip. I think she might have been embarrassed, which seems silly to me. She looked very... sweet, I think, is the best word. Certainly there is nothing to be ashamed of, especially with me as an audience.

She narrows her eyes. “What?”

“Who would have thought,” I try not to laugh, “that such a little snort could sound so sweet.”

“I do not snort!” she stamps her foot in objection. “Pigs snort, ladies—”

“Oh, that was a snort, but don’t worry, it was a very ladylike one.”

“My nanny would be so pleased... and I don’t snort!”

“Do.”

“Don’t.”

She then does something that no one has ever done to me before, a gesture that I have only even seen in my watching of the mirror. She punches me in the arm, which probably hurts her a lot more than it does me. She might as well be a feather.

In my watching of the world outside, this was a thing done between friends and siblings. It is a childish action, one borne out of familiarity. It is not supposed to hurt, I gather. It is almost affectionate.

No one has ever done it to me. No one has ever dared.

“Sorry,” she says quickly, “I shouldn’t have punched you. That was mean.”

“No,” I respond slowly, “that’s not it... it’s not like you can hurt me.”

She plucks the skates from my hands. Her fingers brush my paw fearlessly. “Shall we?”



The lake is as smooth as glass, but it glitters beautifully in the early morning. I leave Rose’s side almost as soon as we arrive, anxious to get out on it. I glide out on four paws, but right myself when I pick up some momentum. It is a while before I look back to see if she is following.

She touches the surface tentatively with the flat of her hand. “Are you sure it’s safe?” Her voice wavers. It is the first time, since the first day, that I have seen her

boldness tremble. It is not her vulnerability that I find attractive, but her humanness. She is afraid of the ice, but not of the monster on it.

I stop spinning for a second and slither towards her. "Mostly," I say, trying not to grin too widely and not doing an awfully good job. "Don't worry, if you fall in, I'll drag you out."

"What if you fall in?"

"Then it's going to be a very lonely one-hundred-and-seventy days for you."

Rose does not look impressed. Her face is stony again. "That's not funny."

"You're right," I say, and then, with unusual boldness, "Whoever shall make you laugh if I'm not here to amuse you?"

"Still not funny."

Laughing, I slide back out. I like her lowering her guard, I like that fact she isn't amused by my self-deprecating comment. I like the fact she laughs.

I do not know if she has fallen into some other thought, but she still doesn't follow me. I fancy, for a moment, that she is looking at me, but on second glance, she appears to be still staring at the ice.

"Rose? Are you coming?"

With careful precision, she slides both feet onto the ice. They immediately go in different directions and she skids to her knees with a shriek. I try not to laugh as I skate towards her.

"Are you all right?"

"Fine, fine..." She tries to pull herself up, but it's difficult on the ice. Gingerly, I hold out my hand. I do not expect her to take it, even brace myself for a cold, repulsive look, but I get nothing but her utterly fearless hand in mind. She pulls herself up, grabbing both arms. She clings onto me as she gets her balance, and a little after that, still.

"All right?" I ask again.

"Better."

Her hands drop away. The imprint of her touch stays on my arm for a long while after.

"I'd give you some instruction, but I'm unfamiliar with skates."

"It's fine. I'm sure I'll get the hang of it."

For the better part of an hour, she experiments, staying close to the bank, launching herself into the thick snow when she feels a fall coming on. Her legs are shaky, but her determination cannot be faulted. Sometimes, I leave her side to glide out a little, twirling around. I think she watches me, but it's probably because she believes I'm showing off. Maybe I am, a little bit.

She's still watching me, though, and not in disgust. Sometimes I see her smile, but she stops the second I catch her looking.

After the first hour, she begins to get more adventurous, drifting away from the bank. I watch her closely, but try to give her some space. I perform another trick, and am rewarded with another laugh. My actions fuel her boldness, and she builds up some momentum, kicking her skates quickly against the surface, sailing forward several feet. For a minute, with her white coat sailing out behind, she looks a bit like a bird taking flight, until she loses her footing and goes tumbling to the ground.

My first instinct is to race over, but I am quickly discovering that Rose is not one for fuss. She rarely wants help, would prefer to do it herself.

She looks fine. She rolls onto her back and lies there, her hair splayed out like flame. It looks particularly red against the white. Her face wears a warm, contented smile, like a drop of sunlight.

She moves to her front, chasing invisible lines in the ice, admiring the glitter, I think. Seeing the beauty in the landscape she once thought ugly.

Her face tightens for a moment. She peers closer, scrubbing at the ice like a clouded window. What can she see?

I hear the crack a second before she does, feel the shudder a second later. My chest stills, my stomach plummeting.

A shadow glides under the ice.

“Rose!”

And with one final, desperate look back at me, she vanishes under the ice.

I skid towards the hole on my belly, my arm reaching into the water. It burns my skin, tearing under my fur. It must be agony for her.

Rose, Rose, Rose!

I might be screaming her name, I can’t be sure. I can barely see her, the waters turning her red cloak blood-black.

No, no, NO!

I fall into the water, the ice stinging my eyes, smashing against my chest like a blade. It makes me want to draw a breath, but I fight against the instinct, clawing my way through the water towards her.

That’s when I see *her*.

Another face. A pale, starved one, half like Mother’s and half more like a monster’s than my own. Dark hair, two horns. Glistening dark eyes.

Moya.

It cannot be. She is dead. She *must* be.

I blink, and she is gone. A figment of my imagination, a vision of the cold. A nightmare roused to frighten me, even when other fears are far more pressing.

My arms wrap around Rose’s waist. I haul us upwards, out of the water. She is barely moving, trembling, her eyes darting under closed lids. She is as small and breakable as a piece of glass in my large, monstrous arms. Her face is blue; she is ice cold.

I call her name, but she does not answer, does not do anything as I race back to the castle. I drop her in the bathtub. Immediately the taps start spouting out hot water. Steam rises, the grate flickers into life. I paw at her clothes, which break away from her skin, but I cannot remove them. I don’t dare to try—I would only hurt her. I scream instead for Ariel, Ophelia, Margaret. They are still here, just about. The bath and the fire are proof of that. Even if I cannot see them, they must be here.

Her clothes start to fall away, tossed towards the side of the room by invisible hands. I turn my eyes away, make a bed by the fireside, sweep a blanket from the mattress and fling it over her still form. Her eyes move, just a little, and for a second I think she opens them. She murmurs something under her breath.

I long for a voice, anyone’s, telling me she will be all right. Some relief, reassurance, understanding.

Instead, I can only stand numbly as I watch her in the water, afraid to reach out.

Eventually, I have to. The steam dissipates. I have to lift her from the tub, gently, carefully, placing her down by the fire, patting her dry. She is warm now, and looks almost peaceful.

I hover by her side for quite some time, afraid to leave her. I try to imagine what the others would say, if they were here. Will the blankets and fire be enough?

Hold her, Ariel would say. It is so clear, I can almost hear her. I admit that it would make sense, but I have already touched her so many times today, and only

once with her permission.

She held my hand. Grabbed it to pull herself up. No fear, no hesitation.

I think she would understand that I am doing this to help her.

As carefully as I can, I lower myself to the floor, put an arm around her. She moves slightly under the weight. It has been years since I have been so close to another person, and never for this long. Grace used to wrap me in fierce hugs, briefly and quickly. She even kissed me on the cheek, once or twice.

Rose reminds me a little of her. She has a similar fearlessness, and I even imagine they look a little similar, although that is probably just because they both look at me in the same way, as if they do not care that I am a monster. As if they don't even see it. Only the fairies, and my mother, have ever looked at me like that.

But there is little else of Grace in her. Grace was kinder, sweeter, nicer. That is not to say that Rose is unkind—certainly, in these last couple of days, she has been much softer to me—but sweetness rose out of Grace like a flower. Sometimes, I think I might have come to love her, if she could have loved me, if circumstances had been different. Other times, I am quite sure that nothing would have ever bloomed between us. She was lovely, but we were different souls.

I do not know Rose well enough yet to know if she is the one, the one I have been waiting for.

I do know I need her to wake up.



Chapter Five



Thorn

I hold her in my arms, waiting for her to wake, to rejoin me. Her heart is beating, she is warm and dry and breathing, but I feel like I cannot move until she is awake again.

Hours pass until I hear her murmur something softly, and suddenly she bolts upright, screaming. I leap away from her, scampering to the side of the room.

“A face, a face!” she blubbers. “A horrible, monstrous face! It was here—in the mirror and—”

My insides twist. I can only imagine what it must be like to wake up next to a face like mine. Fearless as she pretends to be, she is still only human. “It’s all right Rose,” I tell her, as calmly as I can manage, *it’s not her fault you look like this*. “I won’t hurt you.”

Rose blinks at me, as though I’ve just said something incredibly foolish. “Of course you won’t,” she says. Her words hang there for a moment, and then her cheeks go bright red. “Oh, oh no, I didn’t mean—”

I rise to my feet, turning towards the door. “It’s all right, I understand—”

“No, you don’t. I’m not talking about you. I saw something in the mirror, and... and in the lake. A person, or the face of one...”

I freeze. *No, no, it cannot be.* I had assumed that Moya was just a vision I'd conjured, nothing real. But if Rose saw her too...

What does this mean? I had not felt a stirring of her presence in years. She had never appeared to the other guests. Why this one? Why now?

I think about telling Rose the truth. Who she is. I could do that without explaining what *I* am, what she made me. But if I tell her, it may be the last time she's unafraid. She'll jump at every shadow she sees.

She's been through enough as it is. I don't want to worry her. Not now.

Coward, says another voice.

"You've gone through a shock," I say quickly. "And the isolation plays tricks on us all. You must have imagined it. There is no one else here but us." I hate myself for saying them, and the lies taste bitter on my tongue.

But Rose softens almost immediately, making me feel worse. She trusts me.

"Are you sure?"

"I wish I wasn't." *At least, I wish the fairies were here.*

Rose swallows, trembling. Her eyes glaze, and she starts to spiral. I leap to her side, sliding an arm behind her. I hand her a cup of tea the fairies have made up.

"Drink this," I instruct.

"Thank you," she whispers, making me feel worse than ever.

"'Tis only a drink."

"I meant for saving me."

"Oh. Well, entirely selfish of me, I assure you. Wasn't quite ready to give up the pleasure of your company."

"Pleasure? I've been beastly to you... if you'll pardon the pun."

I chuckle, the tightness in my chest loosening. "You've been lovely these past couple of days, and I cannot blame you for any initial frostiness."

"I'm sorry you thought I was talking about your face."

"It's all right. I'm used to it by now."

"That makes it worse!"

"Does it?"

"Yes!" she insists. "No one should have to get used to people being cruel to them."

I drop my head. "Perhaps I felt I deserved it."

"Did you? Deserve it?"

"Are you asking... if I committed some sort of crime to be left here, guarding this place?"

Rose nods solemnly.

"None that comes to mind. No, being here is not *my* punishment."

It was my mother's. Moya twisted my shape to torture her. And it worked beautifully.

Rose frowns. "Then why would you think you deserved it?"

I stare at my hands. Despite it all, despite knowing that I had no choice, a part of me has always wondered if maybe I deserved it for the things that came later, the moments when I couldn't control my strength. The lies I told. "For being like this," I sigh, "a monster."

I am still staring at my palms when Rose slips her hand into mine. I can barely feel the pressure of it, or the warmth of her skin, but the touch sends shivers down me.

As do her words.

"I see no monster here," she says. "But then you did just save my life, so I may be riding that thought for a couple of days at least."

A twitch of a smile rises to my cheeks. Unavoidable. "Perhaps I'll ask you again then when you've fully recovered."

"Perhaps." She lies herself back down in the furs, turning her face towards the firelight. "The other people that came here before me. Were they... what were they like?"

I have been dreading this question, the nakedness of the admission, but at the same time, I am glad that she has asked. That she cares enough to.

"They were... apprehensive, at first. You can hardly blame them. Some... some were very afraid. One girl barely came out of her room the entire time she was here. They could be... could be hurtful, sometimes, but only because they didn't know. But some were very kind. One or two, I would have called friends by the time they left. None..."

None were like you. Bold and unafraid and strange and special and mysterious. None of them I wanted to know as much as I want to know you. I want to unravel you, I want you to unravel me.

I have always hoped for someone to understand me, as well as love me. But Rose is changing things. It is not about me now, but her. I wish to know her, not in the hope of loving her, or her loving me, but just for her.

She moves a little closer, unconsciously, I think. "None what?" she asks.

I shake my head. There is nothing there that I can explain to her just yet. "It doesn't matter," I say. I must change the subject.

Thankfully, Rose does this herself. "Tell me a story," she asks.

No one has ever asked such a thing of me. "What... what would you like to hear?"

"Something true and something magical."

It strikes me that she's probably never been able to request such a thing, and so I tell her a pared down version of the castle's history. "Very well." I clear my throat. "Long ago, the world of men was rampant with magic. Fairies of every kind used to roam the land, as common as cats. While some were kind and benevolent, many misused their power, until a few were as cruel as they were beautiful. Stories were spread about evil deeds, of bad deals, stolen children, curses... as if fairies were the only creatures capable of misdeeds. There was a great war, and both sides suffered terrible losses. The Queen of the Fairies decided that it was best for everyone if they withdrew from the world. She forged a new realm, one where the fairies could live in peace. But she did not wish to deny mankind their gifts altogether, and so a precious few were allowed to roam the world, only a few times a year. This arrangement seemed to suit; fairies were encouraged to be good, hoping to one day gain passage to Earth, and magic was only ever used for good purposes.

"But then a fairy with a dark heart grew jealous, and few things spoil the soul faster than festering jealousy. She thought the Queen unfair for denying them the pleasures of the Earth, and thought mankind foolish and undeserving of such a beautiful, ever-changing land, for the price of paradise is boredom. And so, a second war began, and this time there was to be no victor. The evil fairy destroyed the Queen, but destroyed herself in the process. Slowly, eventually, the land of fairies faded into nothingness, until all that remained of their deeds—good and bad—were a few simple stories."

Rose sighs dreamily. "Mama used to tell me a story just like that, almost word-for-word."

If she is a descendant of the Fey that fled the castle when Moya first rose to power, it makes sense that such a story was passed down through the ages. But Rose's confession brings another opening, a more important one.

“You must miss her.”

She nods. “She died when I was nine, giving birth to my little brother.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I refill her cup. “Tell... tell me about your family.”

“Why?”

“Because you must miss them, and talking about them might keep them close.”

So she tells me. She tells me about her nanny, their cook, caretaker and grandmother-substitute, and her battles with their dogs and the mischief they get into. She tells me about her father. Wise, quiet and careful, who spends most of the day reading or gazing into the fire, his dog at his feet. She talks of her siblings, of her eldest brother Freedom, who constantly irritates her, who spends all of days hunting but secretly paints in his “tool shed”.

“Freedom was with me when I crossed over the stream,” she says. I sense there is a little more to the story, but I don’t push it. “I actually wandered off from the party because I was mad with him. He must be furious.”

With her, or with himself, I wonder? I realise that his is the name she whispered when caught in the storm. She might say she doesn’t like him, but she misses him as much as the others.

She moves onto the rest of her siblings. She is closest to her older sister, Honour, who is beautiful, dependable, calm and loving, “the best older sister I could ask for.” She is due to get married soon. Rose is sad she’ll be missing it. She says nothing, but I feel it. Once upon a time, when the magic was rampant, time moved differently outside in the rest of the world. That is unlikely to be the case now, so I put off offering any false hope. She carries on to her younger sister.

“Hope is more of a recluse than her, serious and quiet, far smarter than any of the rest of us, although not as wise as she would like to be. Yet.”

Beau is last, the child her mother died to bring into this world.

“He is brave and good-hearted and just wants everyone to be happy. He has a delicious, infectious laugh. The first time I smiled after Mama’s death was when he smiled at me.”

She pauses here in her story, her eyes misty. I think of how little she smiles, and wonder if her mother took part of that with her to the grave, and that it takes a lot now to raise the ghost of that smile to her cheeks.

And the greatest source of those rare smiles—her family—has been stolen from her.

“Rose?” I crouch down by her side, wishing I was allowed to hold her. I make my words an embrace. “Rose, you will see your family again, I promise.”

“I know,” she says, and bites down on her lip, swallowing a thousand other fears. She will get them back, but they are not here when she needs them.

She starts to choke on her tears. I hand her a handkerchief, but it does little to stem the flood. She reaches forward and buries her face in my chest. Her hands coil into tight fists, and she vibrates with grief.

Grace cried a lot when she first came here, but no one, not ever, has turned to me for comfort of this kind. For a moment, I am utterly numb, incapable of movement. I have no idea what to do.

But she shows no signs of leaving, of pushing me away, so I circle my arms around her and hold her as she cries, wishing I could feel the softness of her hair between my fingers.

Eventually, the tears start to subside. She goes limp, sliding back towards the pillows, her eyes half-closed already. Her hand is still on my arm, but as I try to tug it away, her grip tightens. “Will you stay?” she whispers.

I look down at her, curled into the covers, her green eyes glassy and imploring. My heart skips a beat, and I realise that there is no chance of me ever leaving her.

I take a breath, trying to control the tremor in my voice. "For as long as you want me."



I watch her sleeping, watch the slow flicker of dreaming eyes beneath dark lashes. I have never watched anyone sleep before. It is oddly calming, at least now she is safe, and warm, *and wants me here*.

With the exception of my mother and fairies, no one has ever requested my presence before, and never to soothe them. I did not think I was capable of such an action. I didn't know what it would feel like, that I could feel some simultaneous mix of warmth and pain. It hurt to watch her suffer.

That's new.

I fall asleep in the corner of her room, still watching her.

The next thing I'm aware of is a gaze on mine, and light filtering through the curtains. Hours have passed. Rose is sitting up in her nest of furs, bright-eyed.

"You're awake," I state numbly.

"You're still here."

"I'm sorry, do you wish me to go—"

"No, I just thought—"

"You asked me to stay—"

"I know, I just... have you been there all night?"

"Oh, don't worry," I tell her. "I was perfectly comfortable."

"On the floor?"

I look down at the ground, ashamed to admit that I *always* sleep here. Another little reminder that I am not human. "I usually sleep on the floor."

Rose seems unfazed by this, or else her expression is unreadable. I search for something else to do, and spy a tray of food on the table, still steaming.

"You should eat something," I announce, bringing it over towards her. She takes up the bowl, her fingers shaking. "Eat up!" I urge.

She stuffs her face with broth-soaked bread and chews. "You sound like Honour."

"Eat first, then talk."

"Well excuse me, Mr Manners..." She swallows and takes a few more mouthfuls hungrily.

"Honour is... your older sister, yes? Hope is your younger one?"

"Correct," she says, gulping down tea.

"So Freedom, Honour, Hope and Beau? I'm noticing somewhat of a theme."

She groans. "Mother's virtuous names. It's a family thing, apparently. I think Freedom got the worst of it."

"Well, I wasn't going to say."

She giggles, the sound warming my chest. "Mama thought she was having a girl, and she had her heart set on Liberty, because the war had just come to a close, but then Freedom was a boy, and so... Sometimes, I joke that she knew he was going to be a beast and was punishing him in advance."

"What about Rose?"

"Story goes that on the day I was born, my father bought my mother a bouquet of roses. He said they were his favourite flower, and they were *beauty personified*.

He was trying to give her a hint. She was previously going to call me Beauty.”

I smile. “It would have suited you.”

She pulls a face. “It’s a ridiculous name and you know it.” Her spoon falls to the bowl with a clatter, and I clear the empty bowl away, fiddling about with stacking the crockery. I don’t know where to put myself. She makes me nervous. They *all* made me nervous at first, but this feels different.

Maybe it’s just been so long.

“What... what happened to your family?” she asks.

I pause, taking a careful breath. I should have expected this question. “My father died before I was born,” I tell her, not wanting to lie. Not wanting to conceal anything. “My mother... I remember her. Vividly. But more... in the way one remembers a painting.”

“What happened to her?”

“She was... she left this world, when I was still very small.”

I do not remember her ever holding me. She faded into the mirrors when I was too young to remember the touch of her, but she appeared in the reflections of the castle for years afterwards, talking to me, teaching me.

It was better than nothing, and more than enough to mourn when she faded altogether.

“What’s your real name?” Rose asks.

I blink. “I’m sorry?” No one has ever asked me such a thing before. A few even relished calling me *beast*, making it linger like an insult.

Grace called me “dear beast.” I liked that. Rose... Rose has never used my name at all.

“Your real name. You told me to call you Beast, but your mother couldn’t have called you that.”

“No, she did not.” She called me dearheart or darling or sweetling. The fairies called me prince, occasionally ‘ruffian’ or ‘little monster’ before the latter lost its humour. My given name, while not a mystery, has never felt like mine, an underused thing suitable only for special occasions. It never suited me. “It has been so long now I can barely remember it,” I tell her.

Rose purses her lips, her eyes running over my form, and settling on something over my shoulder. A painting, I think, glancing backwards. There’s a vase of roses.

“Thorn,” she says abruptly.

“Come again?”

“I am going to call you Thorn.”

“Because... I’m a thorn in your side?” I ask, in a manner I hope sounds teasing.

She laughs. “No! It’s because... you’re a little prickly, but accompany every rose.”

I tilt my head, regarding her closely, like another person has appeared before me. No one, not ever, has wanted something else to call me. The giving of this name is like a gift, one I never knew I wanted. I am no beast to her. If I’m a creature, I’m one like her.

Rose.

And Thorn.

“I’d like that,” I say eventually, very softly. “Thorn.”

Part Two

Spring



Chapter Six



The Beast Within

Rose is bedridden for two days, nursing a heavy cold. I spend the days beside her, reading aloud and trying not to enjoy too much the glitter of rapt attention in her eyes.

On the morning of the third day, she meets me in the corridor, wearing a floaty crimson gown with a pattern of golden brambles on the bodice. I watched her stitching it the night before. Her hair is brushed and half done-up, a shining pile of red-brown curls, and she's donned a coat and gloves too.

"Oh! You're up!" I say.

She grins. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I had thought you may wish to take it easy today."

She shakes her head. "I've had enough of that. I'm growing restless. Shall we go for a walk?"

She heads off towards the entrance hall without waiting for a reply, all the softness and vulnerability of the last few days vanished. Perhaps it is just her, but I feel a new energy to the castle, a brightness spilling into the halls—

“Sunlight.” I stop suddenly, staring out of a window at the end of a corridor. “There’s sunlight—here!”

Pure, golden light floods the corridors, peeling away whatever faint imitation of light previously occupied the space. It is warm and blissful, a light so tangible you could drink it.

Outside, sunlight paints the landscape. Rose removes her gloves, rubbing the leaves of the bushes as if she has forgotten the texture of them. The icicles are melting, our snowman sagging, our winter wonderland dissolving into slush. There are sounds in the gardens—the trickle of water, and something else too.

“Is that—is that a bird?” Rose asks.

A tiny robin sits in the hedgerows. We stare at it as if it is the first bird we have ever seen. The creature flaps its wings and soars into the sky, darting about the clouds with a partner.

I have not seen a bird in two years.

“They must have come through the holes in the veil,” I tell her. “It happens every now and again.”

“Birds and sunlight in one day,” Rose says, with mock surprise. “Whatever next?”



We abandon the wet slush of the garden not long after, but admire it from one of the parlours. Rose thumbs a long lock of hair as her gaze glides outwards, and I wish that I could paint this image, capture the shine of her hair, the folds of her dress, the wistful look that inhabits her eyes. It is almost a shame when the sun goes down and we retire to the library.

It is harder to concentrate on words than it used to be. I can still slip between the pages, but sometimes I find myself failing to fall in like I once did. I am conscious of other things, like the rustle of Rose’s pages, her dreamy sighs, the light the shadows cast across her cheeks. Sometimes I fixate on the way her fingers grasp the book, clutching the sides of the covers as though bracing herself against the side of the ship. She mumbles when she reads; gasps, sighs. When she finishes, sometimes she tugs it to her chest afterwards, like a dear friend she doesn’t want to part with.

I am conscious of time passing, of the approach of the full moon, but I find time dissolving, too, of entire hours passing in minutes.

I love when she gushes, when she explains to me in enthusiastic, blow-by-blow detail a story I have read a dozen times. I always want to read it again afterwards, to love it as much as she did.

Of course, she doesn’t love them all. Sometimes, she throws them down in disgust, halfway through.

“Please tell me she doesn’t marry that wretched Algernon.”

If I remember correctly, she does. The author suggests it is a happy union, but I am not convinced. I never thought Algernon was good enough for her, either.

“I think she—”

“If Edwina marries him, I don’t want to hear it.”

“She... she decides to go through with the wedding, to please her father, but during the ceremony, her best friend Lucy arrives, and the two of them run off together to her great-aunt’s villa. Algernon pursues them and is revealed to be the wrastral you imagine him to be. He attacks Lucy and Edwina, but then Great Aunt Imogen shoots him from the balcony. They bury him in the garden and live the rest

of their days in peace and prosperity.”

Rose blinks at me, and I wonder if I went too far with the murder. She laughs, folding the book away. “I really hope it ends that way,” she says. “Find me something happy. Find me adventure and true love you can feel.”

I shuffle to my feet and head over to the nearest bookcase, scanning the spines for one that fits this description, that she hasn’t read before. The rate she reads, she’ll have finished most of them by the time she leaves.

Tick, tick.

“I wonder, with your love of romance, you aren’t a little more inclined in your own life.”

She groans. “You sound like Honour. Love and marriage and babies.”

“You’re not interested in those things?”

“Maybe,” she says, “but only for an exceptional person.”

My throat tightens, wondering if I could never come close to being exceptional for anyone.

“Books are easy,” she continues. “In books, everything is neat and tidy and believable, and I can have that romance in a few hundred pages, and never have to worry about the rest.”

“The rest?”

“The messy bits. The bits that come after. The bits no one wants to write about. When the couple argue, or drift apart, or...”

Or die. Like my father. Her mother.

She looks into the fireplace, her expression glazed. “I like happy endings,” she says. “But I don’t think they exist, not in real life.”

“Maybe,” I said, “but I think I’d grasp at the chance of a happy-for-now rather than a long and miserable life. Wouldn’t you?”

She shrugs. “I think I am destined for a mediocre existence. Never completely miserable, never completely happy, either.”

“You think?”

She puts on a smile, and holds it for a moment, as if afraid her thoughts have become too dark. “Ah, I think I’m just unsettled by that last book. Find me another, please?”



The next day, I wake early and go for a walk around the gardens before breakfast. I find a patch of snowdrops in what used to be the herb garden the next morning, out exploring the new corners of the ground. I pick them excitedly, pausing only to wrap them with a scrap of lace ribbon, and race to Rose’s door.

She smiles when I hand them to her, a look warmer than sunlight. It gives me the courage to seize her hand and pull her into the gardens to show her the spot. Most of the snow has vanished now. Grass grows in its place.

“Look!” I grin, unable to help myself, as I point to the corner of the garden. “Snowdrops, Rose! Snowdrops! The garden is still alive! I have lost count of the years since I have last seen real flowers.”

I half want to dance with her, to grab her delicate hands and spin her around. No, not *half* want. There is nothing half when it comes to her. I do want to. I’m just not brave enough to.

“What’s causing this?” she asks. “Why all this change? Why now?”

“I’m not fully sure,” I say, calming down a fraction. “I was certain this place was only a year or so away from crumbling completely. And now this...” I look at

her. She is the only thing new, the only thing that's changed. "It's probably you, you know."

"Me?"

"The timings match up."

"I'm not doing anything!"

"'Tis just a theory."

"A ridiculous one."

She goes back to the castle to hunt for a tiny vase, still smiling at the gift. I try to ignore how happy that makes me, but it rises up in my chest, like water against a dam.



A few days later, we curl up for a lazy afternoon beside the fire, having spent the morning racing through the grounds. It's still cold. A fire roars in the grate, and we sit beside it, each with a book in our laps. It's so comfortable that I can feel myself dozing off, but I don't want to move from my spot beside her.

I wake up on the floor a little while later, Rose smiling above me.

"What... what's going on?" I murmur, pushing myself upwards. My head feels heavy, like it belongs to someone else. It is still just about light.

"You fell asleep."

"What time is it?"

"About dinner time."

"Why... why are you still here? You should have woke me—"

She giggles. "You fell asleep on my dress. I couldn't quite wriggle out."

"Oh. Oh my. I am so sorry—"

"It's quite all right. It was nice. You're very sweet when you're asleep."

She reaches across to touch my face, but a sudden sharpness spikes through my temples.

Oh, oh no—

I glance at the window. It is nearly black, and the moon is full.

The transformation.

I am supposed to be a mindless monster. Moya's curse transformed me, mind and body. It is only Mother's counter-curse that makes me otherwise, save for the night of the full moon, when dark magic is at its peak.

I become a full monster.

It was easy to manage when I was small, but as I got older and stronger, impossible. The fairies had to lock me away. But when it was just me, I never bothered. There was no one to hurt, and I was less likely to tear at myself when I had a semblance of freedom.

I still keep track of the cycle of the moon, but Rose's presence has obliterated my routine. I'd paid no notice of the passing of the days.

Pain ripples through me. I suppress a groan. There is no time to explain—

Rose frowns. "Are you all right?"

"A sudden headache," I say, limiting the lie. "Forgive me. I think I'll retire early—"

"Can I get you something—"

The offer should warm me, but I cannot feel anything but the pain pulsing in my head, and the desperate desire to get away from her. To keep her safe. To stop her from seeing what I really am.

“No, it’s quite all right. Probably just too close to the fire. I just need to go lie down.” I murmur a thanks and stumble into the corridor, almost falling into a bust of my great-grandfather. There’s no time to go to the dungeons, no time even to get outside. I fall into my room, collapsing on the marble. Every muscle in my body feels like it’s on fire.

I try not to scream, certain it will alert her.

Foolishly, I almost want her to come. I don’t want to be alone. Despite the fear, despite the danger, I almost cry out. *Please, please, help me.* But there is only one way she can help me, and if she sees me like this, she never will.

I long for the fairies, for someone, anyone. The first transformation without them was excruciating. There was no one to keep me occupied as I waited for it to happen, to sit behind the bars and speak softly until I wasn’t myself any more. And in the morning, when I woke, although there was a blanket over my shoulders and a bowl for me to clean myself up in, there was no Margaret to stroke my head, no Ophelia to clean my wounds, and no Ariel to make silly jokes to me until I cheered up. I was always myself again after laughter.

I do not laugh much anymore, I realise. Even Rose laughs more than me.

Rose.

I turn to my door, and realise it’s still open. A sharp bolt of horror splits through me. I crawl towards it, but darkness clouds my vision, and I’m lost to it entirely.



I dream of Mother, I think. Of what I imagine her hands to feel like.

Then I dream of Penelope. Sweet, shy Penelope, who might have grown to like me if it wasn’t for her discovering me in the throes of transformation. I was always a monster to her after that, and she a shadow in this place until she left.

When I was very little, the fairies would hold me until I transformed. Mother would sing to me through the mirror. I never felt alone, back then.

But Mother vanished. Her song stopped. And I got larger, stronger.

I’d wake up in the morning, and find Margaret’s arms were bandaged. “Just scratched,” she told me. “They’ll be fine, soon.”

And because she was fey, they were. She never scarred.

But I’d discover bits of her dress they hadn’t managed to clear away in my room afterwards, shredded fabric that could have been her flesh. And during one transformation, when I reached for her, she flinched with the memory of pain.

I didn’t let them touch me after that.

Sometimes they still sang to me.

“Wake up, dear beast.”

Grace?

Someone is knocking on my door. I open my eyes. Nothing in the room is wrecked, thankfully, but my entire body aches, as if someone has stuffed a stranger’s bones inside my skin. My head is spinning as I climb to my feet. Nothing bloodied, nothing broken.

Another knock, louder than the first.

“Thorn? Are you awake? It’s almost midday.”

I force myself to move towards the door, each step difficult.

“Thorn?”

I click the door open. Rose stands in a patch of light, her eyes large. “Are you all right?” she asks.

I nod, wishing I could summon more energy. "Forgive me," I tell her, my voice rough, "I did not know what time it was. I did not get the best night's sleep."

"Are you ill?" she asks.

Her hand moves to my face, but I jerk away from her. I don't know why. I *want* her touch. I crave it. But I'm so unused to it that it frightens me. I am disarmed by her, unravelled.

"I'm fine, Rose. I shall clean up and be down for lunch."

"If you're not up to it, I can bring you something—"

"I'm fine."

I close the door, and sink to the floor, my strength vanishing. I should have told her I was unwell. I should have let her help me. I can fool myself into pretending I don't want her to worry, but the truth of it is that I'm afraid of her seeing. I'm afraid of wanting her. And I hate that she might pity me when I am lying to her.

I do not deserve your pity, Rose. I deserve your scorn.

I think of Angelica, of Miranda and Isabella. I imagine their looks of revulsion, their disdain, their hatred. It's what I deserved. For the lies, for the imprisonment. My fault, if not my actions.

Look at me that way, Rose, I beg inwardly. I know how to live with that.

But of course, she doesn't. When I join her in the dining room, having guzzled a restorative tea and taken a moment to compose myself, her eyes dart over me, searching for anything amiss. I steel myself and do my best to act normally.

"Did... did you hear anything last night?" Rose asks gingerly.

I bark an answer before I can think. "No."

"Only... only I thought... I was sure... Did you... did you get up at all?"

"I went for a walk at one point, to try and help me sleep." I am amazed how easily the lies come, and I hate myself for it. Then I hear what she is saying. Cold horror grips me. I left the room. I went to hers. If she'd come out...

Ophelia's cracked wing. Penelope's screams.

Or worse. So, so much worse.

I swallow everything. I stiffen my face. "You heard me."

She nods, almost guiltily, as if she is the one that should be ashamed. "I called out to you, but you didn't—"

"I was half-asleep."

"If you're sure—"

"Well, who else would it be?"

For a moment, Rose says nothing, giving me plenty of time to hate myself, for the lies to fester.

Tell her, tell her...

But Penelope's wails rise up again, Angelica's cold, dark stare. The thought of Rose fixing me with either cuts into my chest. I cannot let her know. Not when she's starting to like me. I don't want to break her, or break whatever she's doing to me.

Coward.

"Would you... like to join me for a walk?" Rose offers, trying to sound bright. "The maze is growing. We can probably get lost in it now."

It is perhaps the worst thing she could do, being so nice to me now. It makes me hate myself more. I sigh.

"If you wish."

Rose seems annoyed by this response, or my tone, and suggests the library instead. It's a better idea. Easier to pretend nothing is amiss. But Rose keeps

talking, keeps offering suggestions of what to do. Trying, I think, to work out what's wrong, or at very least distract me.

I deserve none of it.

"Are you sure you're all—"

"I'm fine!" I turn my page angrily.

Rose tenses, inching back, almost imperceptibly. "Will you... be joining me for dinner, at least?"

"No, not tonight," I tell her, too angry with myself, too tired and too sore to think of any excuse.

Something dark flickers in Rose's eyes. "Why not?"

"I am not hungry."

"It's several hours away!"

"Oh, whatever."

"Fine!" she hisses, slamming her book closed. "Go ahead and starve!"

She huffs towards the door, and the liquid guilt inside me churns. *Say something to her.* I climb to my feet. "Rose," I start, stopping her in her tracks. "I'm sorry, I'm just... I'm not myself today."

She turns her face towards me, just a fraction. "Is that it?"

My traitorous head nods.

"Because... if it were anything else... I should like to know."

"Why?" I ask, terrified of the answer. Of what it can't be, and what it is.

"Why what?"

"Why should you like to know if something was wrong?"

"Nobody likes to be left in the dark," she says. "And besides... if there was something I could do to help... I would want to do it."

"Would you?" I take a step closer, hardly daring to believe her words.

"Yes."

"Why? Why would you want to help me?"

It is agony waiting for her reply.

"You are my friend," she says carefully. "And when you're not being thoroughly miserable, you are quite a good one!"

She slams the door behind her as she leaves, the weight of her words both a blow and a balm.

Chapter Seven



The Ghost in the Garden

For days, I think about telling her, after I've recovered fully and the fear of what could have happened dissipates. I come close to it several times, but my courage always fails me.

I am not as brave or fierce as she is.

The exact words of Moya's curse were, "In this state he shall remain, until someone, fierce in soul and fair of heart, can love him for who he truly is... but if he loves her, and she leaves him, his heart will shatter and he will die."

I don't think any of the others were both fierce and fair, not in the way Rose is, which means she's the first person that truly fits the description. Moya never wanted it broken. It was not meant to be easy.

It still isn't.

I pored over the words for years, hoping for some kind of loophole or plainer meaning.

I'm still searching. Does she just have to love me, or *announce* that she loves me?

Both still feel equally impossible.

Rose avoids me for a little while, saying almost nothing, but the silence is more distracted than cold. Now that life has returned to gardens, she has made it her mission to tidy them. She spends every morning out there, pruning and cutting, raking and digging, coming back to the castle mud-streaked and smelling of warm earth.

And smiling. At life, if not at me.

There's nothing angry in her now. It's melted away with the last of winter, and I cannot find the bravery to risk bringing it back.

Tomorrow, tomorrow. I'll tell her tomorrow.

I find her out in the garden the next day, kneeling in the flowerbeds, humming to herself. Around her, bees buzz softly in the hedgerows, and I almost imagine the birds are harmonising with her. The breeze, the sun, the birds, the bees, all seem for a moment in perfect harmony. I am certain, for just a fraction of a second, that this is the most beautiful thing I have ever witnessed.

Then Rose's eyes meet mine, and her smile radiates into my chest, and I realise I was wrong.

Something has shifted between us, changed in the air we inhabit. She looks at me differently. Not like my mother or the fairies. Not even like Grace. It is very hard to describe. It's like she sees something else. When her eyes catch mine, I know she is looking beyond them. Her gaze makes me tremble inside.

Perhaps it's just me. Perhaps it's wishful thinking. Perhaps I should ignore it.

But I'm certain she's never looked at me that way before.

She has a slight smudge of dirt on her cheek, and I want, more than anything, to brush it from her skin. I wonder what her skin feels like, if I will ever know the feeling of another's skin on mine. She smells wonderful, but it is a hard scent to put into words. Fresh and earthy and warm and bright, like the smell of a summer garden after a storm.

"Good morning," I say cautiously. "You missed breakfast."

She wipes her forehead with the back of her hand, leaving another muddy smear across her face. "I was preoccupied." She gives me another, dazzling smile.

"As I see. You don't need to... dig in the dirt," I tell her. "The gardens do rather have a way of... sorting themselves."

I'm almost sure I hear the tinkling of bells, the sound the fairies use to make, but I see nothing. Wishful thinking, brought on by the memory of Ophelia tending to these gardens until her form faded entirely. I am certain she would be grateful for the assistance. Ophelia shared everything.

"But I like digging in the dirt," Rose insists.

"Then... carry on. Do you need a hand?"

"Um... you could break up those twigs for me? Clear any of the rocks and branches..."

This is an easy task for me. Rose turns to re-plant a batch of rosemary, but I'm done within minutes. Rose's eyes widen in amazement, and I try and fail to swallow my pride.

"That was quick! What did you use to break up the branches with?"

I look down, my pride wavering. "My hands."

"My brother would be very jealous."

I lean against the wall, half in shade, envying this human man with his normal mortal body. "I imagine it would be rather the other way around."

"Freedom has no need for good looks," she assures me. "His internal hideousness blinds everyone. He'd be much better off with strength. Or sense. Or intelligence."

I half-snort. "I'm still trying to work out if you actually like your elder brother."

"Me too." She shrugs, but a flash of something springs across her face. She's missing him.

I turn my gaze away, giving her a moment. I summon a happy memory. Felicity comes to mind. She enjoyed the gardens too. Not like Rose does, by practically crawling into them, but she delighted in studying the various flora and fauna. I was half in love with her, but I think it was more the idea of her that I enjoyed. It's hard not to like someone who's kind to you.

Sometimes, I worry that I like Rose more *because* she can be mean. It makes me believe her when she's good to me.

"Thorn! Look!" Rose squeaks.

I scramble in front of her, throwing out my arms, searching for the cause of alarm as if I expect one of Moya's demons to come crawling out of the rosemary. Instead, all I see is a tiny little creature sweeping up loose twigs, its wrinkled visage peeking out beneath a tiny hood.

"It's a brownie." I grin, warmth flooding through me. I haven't seen any here since I was a child. I thought they'd all whisked themselves across the gateway. But it is here. The castle is not just alive, but growing in magic.

I glance at Rose. *How? How are you doing this?*

Most of the other girls had some kind of gift or power, a remnant of the fey magic that still ran through their blood. It was never obvious enough to cause any alarm, or even really to be noticed by someone who wasn't looking for it. Penelope had a way with animals, they were drawn to her, charmed by her. Isabella could make people feel whatever she was feeling when she sang. Grace... Grace knew things would happen before they did. Not always, not perfectly, but often enough that it was clear she had a gift.

What is Rose's? Is it just the garden, or something... more? I cannot put my finger on it.

I turn back to the brownie. "We should turn our backs."

"Is it dangerous?"

"No, they just don't like being looked at..." I glance back at it anyway, unable to stop myself. *Magic, magic.* And if it's here, if magic truly is returning, then there's a slim sliver of a chance the others might too. "They're supposed to be good luck, help around the house. We should leave some food out. The others will be thrilled."

"The others?"

"The... remnants of magic. The things that clean and provide us with food."

"They're brownies?"

"No," I say, hope dissipating, "they aren't really anything, anymore." I look back at the little creature, but it has already vanished.



That night, I dream I'm in the gardens in full summer. Someone drifts beside me, clinging to my arm. Rose, surely. Her touch seems familiar.

I realise my arms are human. This is not unusual. I often dream I'm human, in the shape I'm supposed to wear, although I never see my face. I dream of long, pale fingers, of muscles and sinews I think are there, beneath the surface. Somewhere.

I turn to face the person by my side, only it is not Rose.

“Grace!” I say, with some alarm.

It has been a long, long time since I have dreamed of her. She looks different from my memory, different from the portrait that hangs in the tower. She looks older, although her face is as unblemished as ever. There’s a calm serenity to her that almost permeates the air.

She smiles wryly. “Not who you were expecting?”

“I... I didn’t... it’s just been so long—”

“Or perhaps, not who you were wanting?” The coyness in her lips gathers volume. She was never this sly before.

“You’ve changed,” I say.

“Death makes us change somewhat,” she says sagely, but her words make me shudder. My gut tightens. “Oh,” she continues, a little sadly now, “you didn’t know.”

The mirrors—my only way of seeing outside the castle—stopped working shortly after she left. I saw her wedding, though. I knew that she was happy.

What happened?

“I lived very well, before I died. I shan’t bore you with the details. But I was happy. So few regrets.” She touches my arm. “I thought about you most days, you know. Wished you happiness. Prayed that someone could free you soon. I dreamed of seeing that day. Perhaps I still will.”

I sigh. “I’m not sure it’s on the cards.”

“Giving up so soon?”

“It’s been years!”

“I meant... are you giving up on Rose?”

I pause for a moment, swallow. I can’t give up on her, I can’t. As much as it hurts to hope, I find myself injured more by the thought of not having a future with her. Of denying myself that chance. It is worse to imagine her gone, because... because I’m not sure I will have another, after her. Hopelessness would be worse than hope.

“No,” I reply softly. “I can’t give up on her.”

Grace does not ask for a further explanation. “Good,” she says simply. “Because she won’t reciprocate easily. And not because she doesn’t feel anything for you.”

“Oh?”

“We all have our demons,” she says, and for the first time, she sounds sad. “Don’t give up,” her voice is forceful now. “Don’t ever give up.”

We wander into the herb garden. Rose is there, minding the bushes, as perfect in my dream as she was in the daylight.

“She’s beautiful,” Grace remarks.

“Yes,” I admit. “She is.”

“Don’t—don’t be afraid.”

I want to laugh and tell her I don’t know what she means, but I do, and that frightens me in itself. I want to run from the fear of it all.

Grace turns to slip away.

“Grace—how do you know all of this? About what Rose is thinking—about... about what *I’m* thinking?”

“I’m a dead part-fey,” she says, tapping her nose. “I still have a few tricks up my sleeve. Good luck, my dear beast. My friend. You will need it.”

There is a ghostly quality to the light the next morning, as if Grace's presence has stretched out from the dream. A white, fine, warm glow splutters about the room. There is an ache in my chest from the knowledge, the assurity now, that she is gone. But there is also a lightness. She is still here.

It is a little late for breakfast, so I head outside. The entire garden is shrouded in a fine, light rain, and the only drop of colour comes from a still figure standing under a tree. Rose.

She is wearing her hair in a long braid that falls down one side of her face. The tip curls in several directions. Droplets of rain glitter down her cheeks, like a diamond dust. She looks like she has been crying.

"Are you all right?" I ask.

She prickles at my voice, turning sharply and brushing her cheeks. "Just remembering the day my sister got engaged," she tells me. "It was raining then like it is now."

This does not seem like a cause for tears, but there must be more to it. "Not a happy memory?"

"A very happy one," she insists, a little too forcefully. "Charles is lovely."

"You sounded a little forlorn then, is all," I respond. I do not think she would like it if I asked about the tears. "My mistake, I'm sure."

"I..." she pauses. "I was worried about her getting married, and moving away... even if it was only across the village. Foolish, I know."

"I don't think so. Missing someone is rarely foolish."

It is a feeling I am all too accustomed to.

"I've never made friends easily," she admits.

I wait for her to say something else. This news does not surprise me. Not because I find her unlikeable—quite the opposite—but she is unusual, difficult to read. Most people don't want mysteries as friends. "Oh."

"Oh?" Her eyes narrow. Have I said something offensive? "No, 'oh that can't possibly be true'? Or, *You are far too witty to lack for company, dear Rose*—"

I try not to smile at this. "Company," I explain, "is not the same as friendship. And you said yourself that you long gave up trying to get people to love you. It falls to reason that you do not make friends easily."

Rose nods, ever so slightly. "Honour is the closest thing I have to one."

"What about the friend that you kissed?"

Perhaps I shouldn't have brought that up, but I am still curious about him. I want to know why she felt compelled to kiss him, yet doesn't seem attached to him. What I require from her is far more than a kiss, and I believe in Grace's words, in Rose's sentiment, that being myself is the best option... but I want to know. I want to know what she likes, what she wants. If I have any hope at all.

"He doesn't... he doesn't know me," Rose says softly. "He doesn't understand me. I don't know him really, either. I think that friends usually do, don't they? It's not just a collection of what you know about them, but what you know *of* them. The sort of person they are. Whether their soul is shaped like yours."

What do *I* know of Rose, so far? I know what she likes, she is free enough with that, but what sort of person is she? She loves her family, this is clear. I feel as if she would do anything for them. I think—I know—that she is a good person. She can be short-tempered and sharp, but there is a gentleness to her in the way she tends to the garden, a grace about the way she moves. When I see her disappear into a book, I see a range of emotions scurry through her: she sighs in relief when the heroine makes it through a challenge; she is empathetic. She is bold, fearless, curious... however her soul is shaped, it is a beautiful one. Whether or not it

matches mine remains to be seen.

“You and I are friends, are we not?” I ask.

“Of course,” she replies as if it is the simplest thing in the world, without realising how few have ever called themselves such, without knowing how much it means.

And yet... I am becoming increasingly aware of how much I want her to be far more than that.

Chapter Eight



The Moon Returns

By the time Rose's second month in the castle is drawing to a close, the gardens are teeming with life, filled with butterflies, birds, hedgehogs and rabbits. Our days are filled with birdsong.

Rose has come alive too, like a flower under the sun. She is smiling and singing and distractingly pretty. I have never watched anyone with the intensity I watch her, and no one else's image has followed me back to my room at night, to sing against my dreams. She mesmerises me far more than the waiting garden, humming with expectation, never quite in bloom.

I prowl the grounds during daylight, refamiliarising myself with the wildlife while Rose prunes and pots. People might fear me, but the animals are not so apprehensive, and within days I have most of them eating out of my hands.

"How are you doing that?" asks Rose, a little crossly.

I smile at her, tugging her down to my level, and pour a handful of seeds into her lap. The birds dart around her, uncertain. Rose holds out a hand, but they flurry away.

"It didn't work."

"Have patience."

“That’s really not one of my qualities.”

It really isn’t. I try to teach her how to fish, but as my technique is to let the fish wander into my hands and she has to use a net at very least, she quickly loses interest. She manages to teach me how to light a fire without the help of the fairies, however, and we spend an evening beside the lake dining on freshly caught fish.

It is the night of the full moon. I have spent all day trying to drum up the courage to tell her, but, as usual, it’s fallen victim to memories of screams and the cataclysmic fear of Rose’s smile vanishing forever. If only I cared about her less. If only she was more like Angelica or Miranda.

But then she wouldn’t be Rose.

I feign the need for a quiet evening and retire to my chambers. Rose, thankfully, takes dinner in her room and does the same. I sneak out into the gardens before dark and crawl away into the maze. It seems the best place for it. I’m loath to lock myself in the dungeons, knowing I’ll likely bite and claw myself when I cannot escape. I’m eager to avoid that added pain, especially since Rose is sure to notice if I’m covered in wounds the next day.

In the maze, I’ll have the room to run without the risk to hurt. Even if I get out, I’ll never make it back into the castle. There’s no risk of me hurting her.

I hope.

I reach the centre of the maze and sit down beside the fountain, the moon staring down behind a veil of pale daylight. Not long now.

A shiver of something slithers down my spine. The dark echo of a person. For a moment, I can almost hear breathing.

I turn. A face stares at me from the water, pale and starved and smirking.

Moya.

Reason pulses in the back of my mind. *Just a reflection. Just a reflection, she can’t hurt you.*

As usual, fear wins out. I can’t even raise my hand to break the image. I stare numbly back as her, waiting for the vision to vanish, to be a nightmare, nothing real.

She keeps staring.

The pain starts in my temples, tendrilling out to the rest of me. I double over, unafraid of whimpering, and wait until it takes me.



Despite my unfortunate beginnings, my father’s death, my curse and the loss of my mother, I had quite a happy childhood. I was never bored, and never alone, although sometimes I did feel lonely. The fairies were keen for me to experience everything I possibly could, or understand what I couldn’t. They showed me other childhoods in the mirrors, things they couldn’t bring to me. I often longed for other children to play with.

“Well, I’m small enough to be a child,” Ophelia said.

“And I’m childish enough,” said Ariel, sticking out her tongue.

They chased me around the room until we collapsed into fits of giggles, and I forgot why I wanted anyone but them in the first place.

Things got harder as I got older, as I became more aware of what I was missing, and could ask questions like why I wasn’t like them, and why I hurt so much every full moon.

Things got harder when I learned who Moya was, when I truly understood the curse.

What I couldn't understand was why she did it. None of the answers the fairies could come up with satisfied me.

"She was jealous, I think, of what your mother had," Margaret would explain.

"I think she wanted others to be as hurt as she was," Ophelia offered.

"Who cares?" Ariel spat. "She's not worth discussing."

What my mother had done kept Moya at bay for the better part of a decade. The only sign of her presence was the black, covered frame in the Hall of Mirrors. It couldn't help but draw my gaze, the amount of time I spent up there. I flecked the cover with paint once, trying to make it less scary.

Margaret was furious.

"What would I see, if I pulled down the cloth?" I asked her.

"Let's not find out," she said briskly, pulling me away to wash my mucky paws.

But a few months later, after a particularly bad transformation when I escaped, broke Ophelia's wing, and hurt myself, I wanted to see. I wanted to speak to her. I wanted to ask her *why*. Why she had hated my mother so much she had cursed her child.

I got up early one morning, certain the fairies were still sleeping, and dragged myself back to the Hall. I stood in front of the frame, my fingers clutching the sheet, trembling with anticipation.

I yanked it down. It fell to the floor in a long, slow movement, pooling to the marble like a puddle of black blood.

Moya stood behind it, a tall, pale figure in a purple gown, with a spill of dark hair like my mother's, and a smile like a knife.

She gave a mock bow. "Your Highness." Her voice was ice.

I thought about running, but my muscles seized up, screwing me to the floor.

"Moya," I whispered.

Her grin sliced through me, and I knew, somehow, that like my mother could once watch me from the other reflections in the castle, Moya could see something too. She had been watching me all of my life.

"What brings the young prince to my cage this fine day?"

She knew. She must have known why I was there. "I need to know," I said, trying to hide the quiver in my voice. "I need to understand why you did it. I never did anything to you—"

"This was never about you," she sneered. "This was never designed to punish *you*. Indeed, you wouldn't be suffering at all if my fool of a sister hadn't brought back your mind."

"Sister?" I frowned. "But... but Mother brought that back."

Moya's grin widened. "Oh, my dear little nephew, did no one tell you?"

"You... you're my..."

"You need not call me aunt, if you don't want to. I ceased being Eilinora's sister long ago."

"She... Mother was your... and you..." I couldn't get the words out. It made even less sense than before. "Why?"

"Because she took things from us that she should not have taken. Because she chose mortals over her own kind."

Was she talking about my father, or the fact Mother chose to separate the Fey Lands from the Mortal Realm, in order to protect both?

"The mortal world... it's not ours to—"

“*Everything* was ours, once. But you’re right. We lived in harmony for a while. But it could never last forever.”

“Only because you—”

“Protected our people, when the mortals started to plot against us? Took a few, tiny liberties? Many supported me, you know. Many knew I was the better queen. *I* would never have damned us all to save a single child.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, because I thought she might be right. I was not worth what Mother had sacrificed. No one person could ever be worth all that.

“You know, I loved a mortal once,” she continued, apparently growing bored of my silent panic, “but they are not worth loving. And they cannot love us. We are too great and magnificent and awful for them. They can *never* love us. And so they must fear us instead.” She smiles again, running a finger down the inside of the glass. “You should thank me, you know. No one will ever love you like this, and if you never love them... you will never be hurt.”

“Prince! What are you doing?” A shriek came from the door. Margaret. I turned and fled, knocking her over with the force of my fear, my utter desperation to escape. Moya laughed as I ran, and her laugh followed me through the castle, glaring and sneering in every surface, from the polished brass to the suits of armour.

I fled towards the meadow, to the fog that separated my world from the world of mortals, and lay down there in the grass until I could breathe again.

No one will ever love you like this.

No one was coming to rescue me.

Mother had doomed us all.

Ariel found me a short while later.

“She’s my aunt,” I sobbed. For some reason, this seemed the most important thing. My father was dead. My mother probably was too. I had no other blood in the world apart from the woman who had done this to me.

Ariel put her arm around me, and I longed for the days when I was small enough to crawl into her lap.

“Family isn’t blood,” she said. “Family are the ones that stick by you. The ones that choose to be by your side. The ones that love you, who want you.”

“She said that... that no one would ever...”

“Listen, who are you going to listen to to? The crazy sorceress in the mirror or the badass fairy who helped put her there and stuck about to raise you afterwards?”

She had a good point.

“Someone is coming for you, some day,” she carried on. “So buck up.”



I wake at first light under a tree, and hobble back to the castle, stiff and sore but not wounded.

Buck up, I can hear Ariel saying. And then, more softly, *you’re all right*.

I slide into my nest beside the empty fire, guzzle the water that’s been left for me, and sink into an uneasy sleep. Moya is pasted to the back of my eyes, as cruel and real as she was the day I first spoke to her.

I woke something up, after that first day. A fragment of her power returned. She started appearing in other mirrors, after that. And sometimes, during the full moon, her other followers, those imprisoned in the mirror with her, could push back too.

I called them the shadows.

Somehow, sleep does come. A thick, cloying kind, hard to wake from.

Someone is shaking me, calling a name. My name. Only one person has ever uttered it, but it is mine already. It might be a beautiful sound, but it's rushed and desperate and I hurt all over.

"Thorn! *Thorn!* Wake up!"

I moan something, opening my eyes. "Rose?" My voice doesn't sound like my own.

"There's something here," Rose rushes, her voice piped with fear. "Or there was, at least. Last night. I thought... I was worried..."

Horror races through me. My blood turns cold. *Moya*. Has she found a way to torment Rose like she tormented me? What has she seen? "What do you mean, something?"

"Last night, there was something in the grounds. A dark shape—and do not tell me that there wasn't, or you were out for a walk, or anything silly like that. I know what I saw!"

I swallow, and sit myself up, hugging the furs around my waist. I rub my face. That was unlikely to be Moya. Moya would never be so indistinguishable, if she had the opportunity to terrorise instead. Which meant that what Rose saw was likely... me.

Perhaps I should be elated that she doesn't connect me to that clear monster. But I am not elated. I am ashamed.

Tell her, tell her.

"There's something here, isn't there?" Rose continues, giving me no chance to find words of my own. "Something other than the remnants?"

"Oh, they are remnants, all right," I say solemnly. *Explain this, and then what you are.* "But of a much darker kind. When... when the great battle was fought, and the forces of darkness extinguished... a little of their essence, as it was, became trapped inside the walls of the castle."

"Like... ghosts?" Rose swallows, the fear in her expression palpable.

Please, please, don't look at me that way. I don't want to scare you, I want to—

"Yes. Only... they're not really dead. I hadn't seen them for so long, however, I thought perhaps they were all gone. Dried up, like the rest of the magic in this place."

The magic faded a year after Grace left. Moya, who had largely been held at bay for most of my life, got very loud after that. It was months before she too was stilled. That was... a dark time for me, alone with only her. I was sure she was going to escape. I don't know what the others did to tighten her lid.

"But the magic is coming back," Rose reasons.

"They can't feed off of that," I explain. "In fact, it should have the opposite effect. But last night being a full moon... dark magic is at its peak, then. A remnant of that power was bound to show itself, sooner or later." I pray that that is all it is, that Moya has no more power than a shadow. "These things can't hurt you, Rose. I don't... I didn't want you to be afraid. You're safe here, I promise you. No harm will come to you whilst I am still breathing."

I open my mouth to tell her the next thing, that dark magic affects me too, but that I will never hurt her either, but Rose's eyes darken and she scrambles to her feet. Her warmth rips away from me like a wound.

"I can take care of myself," she says tersely. "And I'm not afraid!"

Who said anything about being afraid?

She marches across the room and grabs the door handle. “That thing last night isn’t the only thing I’ve seen. There have been shadows of other things. And I did see a face in the lake. I know I did.”

She slams the door furiously behind her, leaving me alone in the darkened room, my thoughts spiralling and my head pounding still.



Rose avoids me for the rest of the day. I should be thankful as it gives me time to recover, but her anger seeps into the corridors.

I do not know why she thinks I might believe she’s afraid, but I deserve every fraction of her fury and hatred.

I lose track of where she is, but assume she has retired to her chambers. The castle is quiet and dark. I make my way to her door and knock. No answer.

“Rose?”

No reply. My confession slips away from me. I call out to the empty corridor. “Help me,” I whisper. “I don’t know what to do.”

As always, there is nothing. I sigh with a fury that rivals Rose’s, and bolt to the room at the end of the corridor, the one I forbade Rose from entering. Mother’s room. Half shrine, half mausoleum. I always felt closest to her here, although it has been a long time since I entered. My ruined crib, torn apart by the force of my first transformation, sits in the corner like a broken gravestone. A child died inside it. Something else emerged.

I turn to Mother’s portrait, to a woman who looks too young to be anyone’s parent, but the only face of hers I’ve ever known. I stare at her for an age, unsure of what to say.

“Are you even still here?” I ask desperately. “Please, Mother. I know... I know you’re concentrating your magic on keeping her sealed, but if she’s getting out, then either you’re spending it on other things or, or...” *Or you’re finally, absolutely gone.*

I have been mourning my mother most of my life, never knowing if she’s dead, not knowing if she’ll be returned to me should I ever end the curse. I have loitered on the precipice of that grief for years, struggling against the tide, never quite drowning.

But I feel like I am drowning now, drowning now that Rose is trapped here with me, not a liftboat in sight.

“Rose has seen her,” I say, the desperation etched into my voice. I cannot fold it away. Not any more. “I haven’t seen any hint of her or her followers for years. I thought, if you were gone, then she must be too, but if she’s still here... you must be as well. Am I right?” *Please, please don’t be gone.*

But, as usual, there is only silence.

“Where are you?”

I am too afraid of screaming, of wrenching Rose from her sleep, but anger rises and must go somewhere.

I pick up a chair and hurl it against the wall, only stopping myself at the last moment from throwing it at the frame.

Sometimes, I hate her.

I hate that she’s not here, and I hate that she made me human. Being a monster would be easier.

My being here is not my punishment.

But it is. It *is*. I know that Mother suffered, suffers, perhaps, even now, but I can't think of her right now. I think of myself. I think of how unfair it is that my life was destroyed because of someone else's war.

And that Rose's might be lost, too.

"Is she in danger?" I ask, more quietly. "Please, just... find a way to tell me. Is she in trouble? Can I protect her?"

As if I was ever capable of protecting anyone, least of all from Moya. My entire life was a series of other people sacrificing themselves for my sake, of doing nothing but standing by and watching them go.

Standing by, and screaming, I think, remembering the day Margaret reduced her form, and the days the voices began to vanish.

Maybe that's why I wanted to save Grace. To be the saviour rather than the saved, once in my life.

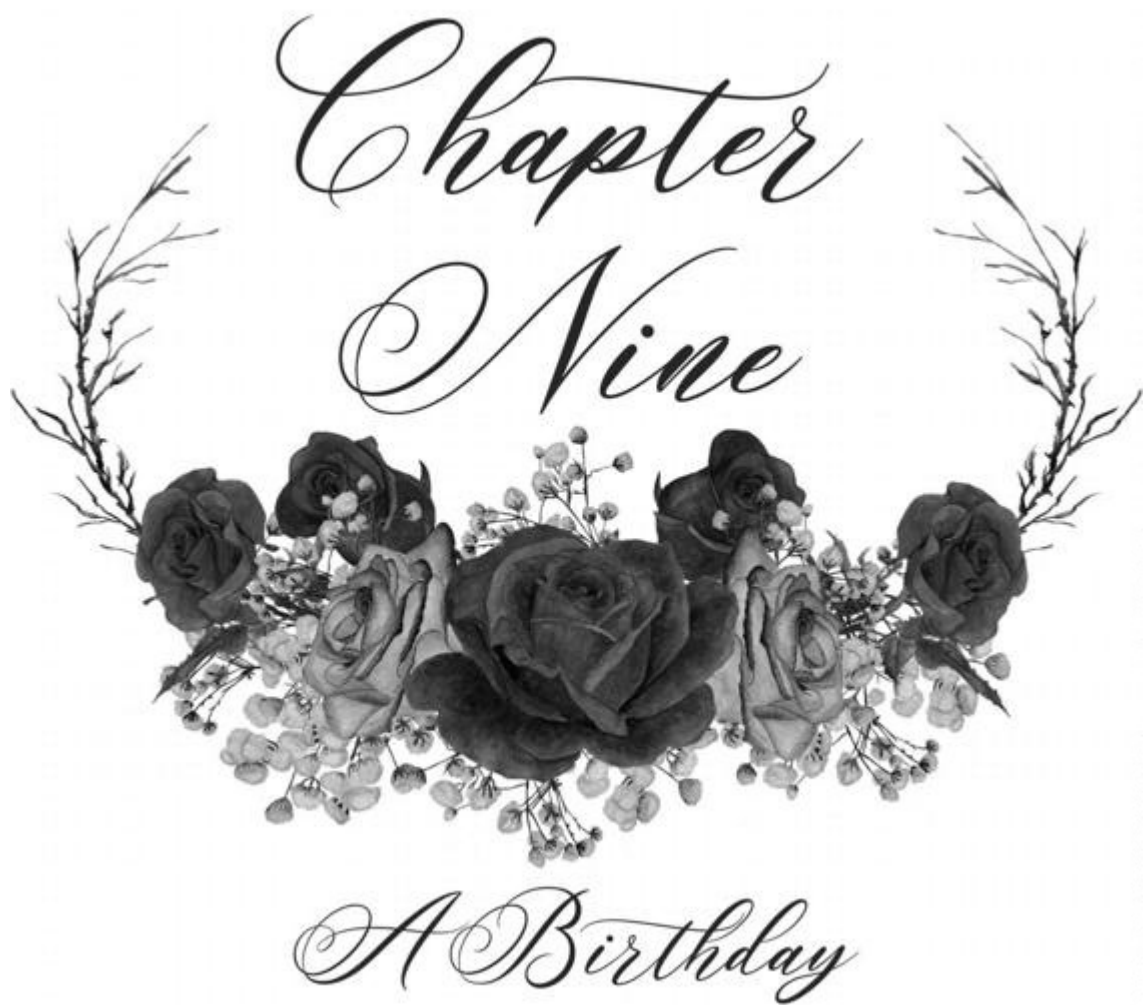
And I still wonder if it was worth it. Less now, but not in this moment. In this moment, nothing feels right, nothing worthwhile. I am no knight in shining armour, no prince, no matter what my mother told me.

I am a beast, the nightmare of children's stories. The monster to be vanquished. A hopeless, pitiful character. Not capable of being the hero.

I lower my head, sinking to the floor. For the first time, I am afraid for someone else. Truly, desperately afraid. If something happens to Rose, any desire to cling to this world will be finally extinguished.

"I am not sure I could survive losing you both."

Chapter Nine



A Birthday

Rose is out of sorts for a few days, skirting around me in a way that doesn't feel like anger. She sings less, has a distracted look about her features, nothing I can pin.

I am afraid of asking if she's missing her family. The answer is sure to be yes.

And she is afraid of something, too. That monster? Moya's face? Or something... something else?

I dream of Grace again. We are in the gardens, watching Rose. I hold out my human hand towards her, and imagine what it must be like to slip it into hers. It turns back into a paw again, as if even my dreams can't fathom such a thing.

Grace sighs. "You and she are so alike..."

I frown. "How so?" I ask her.

She shakes her head, a cascade of gold curls falling around her shoulders. Tiny flowers fall from her tresses and take root in the grass. Definitely a dream.

"You're both so afraid of *nothing*."

"We both have a lot to be afraid of."

"You do," she says darkly, "but you are afraid of the wrong thing."

"Could you be less cryptic, please?"

“Possibly,” she said, “but it is your dream.”

“Then I demand a better answer than that.”

She laughs, long and hard, elbowing me in the side. Her laughter slides into a sad smile. “It isn’t real if I have to explain it to you.”

She starts to walk away, turning towards the meadow, the day bursting into golden light. It starts to swallow her.

“Grace!” I call, stopping her in her tracks, “Are you... are you really here?”

Grace raises an eyebrow. “I’m *dead*.”

“But... you *are* more than a dream, yes?”

“Perhaps.”

“How is that possible?”

“There is magic in the castle again,” she explains. “Enough to allow me a little visit.”

“Then where are you going?”

“To where I’ve always been,” she says. “I’ll be back, Thorn.”

When did she start calling me that?

And why does it feel like that name was always mine?



The next morning, I head downstairs, Grace’s words still tight in my chest, and start sweeping furiously. Anything for something to do.

“Good morning!”

Rose appears behind me in a floaty blue gown studded with pink roses, a vision of spring. She is as light as air. I drop my broom with a clatter.

“Ah, morning!” I rush.

“Why are you sweeping?”

“I was... trying to find something to occupy myself with. I wasn’t sure I would see much of you today. I was afraid that—”

“It doesn’t matter,” she says quickly. “Let’s put it aside.”

I am too grateful she’s speaking to me again to push what secret she’s been keeping, especially as I am hardly one to talk. We eat breakfast together and head out into the gardens. I help her out with replanting some of the large bushes. I love what she’s doing with the place, how the whole thing seems wild and beautiful. She mumbles something about a bench, and I spy a great stone slab not far away I think might work. I sling it over my shoulder and bring it to her.

“Will this do?” I ask.

Rose explodes with laughter.

I blink at her. “What? Not appropriate?”

“I was thinking more of a small wooden seat, not something so heavy!”

“I can take it back—”

“No, no it’s fine, just put it down in the corner.”

Together, we manoeuvre it into the perfect place. She says she’d like an arbour, but doesn’t fancy the work today.

“Let’s go down to the lake.”

It’s a bright morning, but a greyness slithers in as we walk, turning the surface of the water almost black. Rose stills beside me, saying nothing again, her words frozen behind an unreadable mask.

I wade in and try to catch some fish for supper, but there is little to be had today. The blackness is unsettling. I wonder if Rose is thinking of the first time we

came down here, when she saw Moya's face in the lake.

I want to ask, but I'm afraid it might just be that she's still mad at me, so I hold it back and sit down beside her, telling myself it's enough that she is just allowing me to be this close to her.

But it is not enough.

It never will be.



A greyness comes to the castle, the fine weather dissipating. The air seems grainy with it, like a cold dust. Rose abandons the gardens temporarily and hauls up in the library, still quiet, still contemplative.

One evening I bite the bullet and ask the question I've been dreading.

"Rose, are you... are you happy here?"

She bites her lip, looking down, fresh pain glimmering in her eyes. "No," she says, quiet as a whisper. My heart sinks. "But... I'm not unhappy, either. And that part I think I owe entirely to you."

Something almost like joy rises in my chest, but is tempered by her earlier admission. She is not happy.

"Is... is there anything I can do to help you?"

"Not right now," she replies. "But maybe one day."

I nod, and my eyes move past her to rest on the clock atop the mantle. It ticks a little too loudly tonight. Do we have enough time for her not to trust me?

Not that I have ever given her a reason to.



Rose brightens a little after this, and not long after, while we are eating a light lunch one afternoon beside her newly-erected arbour, she turns to me and says, "It's my birthday in two weeks."

I wonder if this is part of what's been bothering her, the thought of spending it away from her family. Perhaps she's annoyed by being bothered by it, like a childish secret laid bare. I sense it would be unwise to ask about either. "Your birthday?" I say brightly. "Well, we must celebrate!"

"We don't have to—"

"Of course we must! What else are we going to do? How do people celebrate birthdays again? I recall there's something about a cake—"

The fairies used to do something to celebrate my name-day, but there was a limit to the festivities we could accomplish with just four of us, and mortal occasions are different. I used to watch them in the mirrors.

Rose frowns at me. "You... don't know how people celebrate birthdays?"

"I've... I've read a little."

"But what about your own?"

"Well, I've had them, of course, but..." I look around, my gaze finally settling on a mirror at the far end of the courtyard. Ivy spills over it. I am half-horrified by the image of the two of us together, half mesmerised. "It has been a long time since I've had anyone to celebrate it with."

"Well," says Rose, suddenly beaming, "that settles it, then."

"Settles what?"

“You’ll have to share mine.”

“That’s really not—”

“Well, it’s my actual birthday, and I insist!”

At this, I cannot help but grin. The idea of sharing anything with her delights me. She pops another strawberry in her mouth and turns back to the book in her lap, as if she has no idea of the gift she’s just given me, the monument of her words.

A gift. I’ll need to get her a gift.

I watch her eyes as they sink between the pages of her novel, watch them flit back and forth between the words with a hunger. She is transfixed, absorbed, betwixt and between. She has been transformed into a liminal creature, belonging neither to this world or the one she reads.

I have often supposed that I might look like that, when I read. Rose manages to make reading look bewitching, however. I could stare at her for hours.

For the first time, I feel myself truly falling for someone. My heart has felt flickerings of emotion before, the faint stirrings of hope. But this is not that. I am not hopeful that I might fall in love with Rose, and she with me. I am painfully aware of how easily I could fall for her, and terrified that she may not with me.

I am going to fall in love with her, if I haven’t already.

For the first time, I do not want it. I do not want the hope, the pain. All too soon, I could love her, and she could reject me, and I could die. The possibility of death has never been so pressing.

Rose has no idea of the fear pulsing through me. She is smiling, still on the same page.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask her, shelving any fear in the face of any beautiful distraction she could offer me.

“Oh, just birthday plans,” she smiles, and nudges my shoulder.

Her touch alone could be the death of me.



The next two weeks pass in a colourful blur of activity. Rose and I make bunting together. I’m a clumsy cutter and an impossible sewer, but she fixes every wonky triangle into a thing of beauty. I make up for my inadequate skills in that department by stringing everything up in the room selected for our festivities.

I spirit in a music box that plays a variety of music, and pull in the harp at Rose’s request, sourcing cards and a chess board as we lack the people for the other games that Rose enjoys. She tells me brightly about musical chairs and guessing games, for once not sounding remotely forlorn when she talks of home.

Much time is spent obsessing over her present. There is plenty of jewellery and fine dresses hanging about that I could give to her, but there is little thought in that, especially as she is welcome to them at any time. I’d like to get her a book, but have access to nothing that she doesn’t. I’d write her a poem if my fingers could craft something legible, or if I wasn’t afraid the paper would crack under the weight of whatever words I could summon for her.

I have to make her something. A made gift is the only thing capable of holding a modicum of my true feelings. I’d like to give her a rose that never fades. The idea stays with me for several days, and eventually, I take all the materials I think I’ll need and head up to the roof terrace. Tiny buds sit among the rosebushes, not quite in bloom. I pick one of the smallest and take it over to the fountain, arranging chain, amber, metal around it.

“I know this might be asking a lot,” I speak to the fairies, with only a shadow of a hope that they can hear me, “but may I borrow some of your magic?”
The water begins to glow.



Three days before the birthday, I realise it’s going to fall on the night of the full moon. There is nothing I can do to avoid this—her birthday cannot be rearranged. I’m hopeful that as we’re spending the entire day together, and the nights are getting shorter, I can easily claim tiredness by the time the moon rises.

If I had any plans to tell her this time, they are quickly ferreted away by the steadfast belief that her birthday will be ruined if I do.

It’s so easy being around her, that I barely think of anything else, like the shadowy, dark parts of myself are evaporated by her company. Every secret ceases to exist when we’re together.

I suppose it’s not just her I’m lying to.

I’m angry at Moya and fate once again, but not just for the curse. I’m angry that they’re stealing away time I could spend with Rose.

Foolish, perhaps, given how much time we already spend together, but I am still greedy for her presence. I wonder if that feeling will grow any more before it abates. It already feels like the kind of longing one could die from.

Oh, Thorn, you really are in trouble.

The day dawns like any other. Rose meets me in the parlour in a simple blue gown, aproned up and ready for something messy. We smile at each other almost giddily.

“Happy birthday,” I say, at the exact time she does. We both laugh, and I try to wriggle away from the pleasure the sound of her laughter strikes in me. “So,” I continue, “What first?”

“First, we breakfast,” she tells me, “and then... we make cake.”

I have never made cake before in my life. Even when the fairies had forms, Margaret refused to let me in the kitchens after a particularly distratious incident in which I coated the room in flour and sugar attempting to re-create a snowy scene in July.

This memory does not make me any less an enthusiastic pupil for Rose, as she carefully measures out the ingredients and sets me to mixing. I’m a bit too vigorous, and coat the surfaces and most of myself in thick dustings of flour.

“Thorn!” Rose laughs.

“What?”

“You’ve aged about thirty years.”

“What?”

She tugs at my elbow, pulling me into the path of a mirror in the hall. The blackness in my fur has almost vanished, hidden beneath a veneer of white. Rose grins, and for once, and even though I am still vastly aware of the differences between the two of us, I do not find it so jarring.

“Oh dear,” I say, looking down at my feet, “am I hideous, Rose?”

She pulls my ear. “Very,” she says, her face alight with mischief.

“Oh well, guess I’ll just have to make you hideous too.”

I shake until the flour comes off like a cloud, covering her in fine powder. She shrieks my name, and beats me with the wooden spoon as I chase her over the kitchen.

It's almost more mess than I made as a boy, and it takes us a long time to clear up, although neither of us seems to mind.

Eventually, the cake is baked, cooled, iced and decorated. It looks awful, but Rose laughs and says it will taste wonderful. We transfer it to the party room, lay out the rest of the food, and head to our rooms to dress for the festivities. The fairies have laid out a blue and silver ensemble for me, and even though I usually find it ridiculous to attempt to dress up, I don't complain. I slide into it, place Rose's present in my pocket, and head back to wait for her. She appears a few moments later in a gown like crushed sunset. A lace ribbon has been woven through her hair; the one I gave to her.

She looks wondrously, impossibly lovely, but it's that action that warms me most.

Probably a coincidence, I tell myself. There's no way she did that deliberately.

"You look... lovely," I manage, wanting to say more but finding the words turn gummy in my mouth. *You are the fairytale creature, not me. I want to paint you.*

"Thank you." She smiles, casting her eyes over my own outfit. "I like your new waistcoat. Who made it?"

"Oh, er, it was just something I found," I say, scratching the back of my neck, unwilling or unable to explain Ariel, Margaret and Ophelia and half of my history. Of course it's ridiculous for a creature my shape to have fancy clothes.

"It suits you." She twirls a lock of hair around her finger, and I wish more than anything I was permitted to stroke it too. "Shall we eat?"

We dine on sandwiches, fruit, cheese and biscuits, followed by extremely generous helpings of cake and sweet wine. We blow out the candles together, and Rose sings me 'happy birthday' with the harp. I repeat the words for her, although I cannot play the instrument. She challenges me to a game of chess, followed by 'beggar my neighbour'. It is a simple game that goes on for far too long, and if there was a way not to win, I would prolong it, just to spend a little longer wrapped up in a task with her, watching her face as the cards fall in or out of her favour.

"Another game?" I suggest.

Rose gets up. "I think it's time for a dance now," she says, going over to the music box. A jaunty tune springs to life.

"A dance?" I ask, trying to hide the fear in my voice. "Are you sure? I can't really..." I look down at my long legs, my huge back paws, and imagine stepping on her feet. For others, they probably just worry that they'll be awkward. I'm more worried about crushing her.

Rose frowns. "You were graceful enough on the ice."

"Yes, but..." *That wasn't dancing. That wasn't being so close to you.* My heart pounds at the thought.

"Suit yourself."

As she spins, her dress fans out into a flurry of layers of petticoat and delicate embroidery. Her hair, too, is lifted from her face, and catches the light from the fire, making her glow like the evening flame.

I want to join her, to touch her, to be with her. The cloud pressed at the horizon.

I stand behind her, wishing for the courage to speak.

Her face breaks into a smile when she turns and sees me. "Changed your mind?"

I can only nod.

"Good."

She seizes me by the hands and charges down the room, pulling me with her, utterly and completely unafraid and unaware of my awkwardness, which dissipates in seconds as she folds in and out of my arms. We speed up, going faster and faster, spinning around, the two of us almost out of breath by the end of the song.

"There," Rose pants, "that wasn't too bad, was it?"

"No."

"Were you afraid you'd step on my feet?"

"A little," I admit. "I... I've never danced with someone before."

"What, never?"

"No."

I must have danced with the fairies, but I don't remember it. And that's different to dancing with Rose. Everything's different with her.

She goes quiet for a moment, and I wonder if I've said something to make her feel awkward. A silence hums around us.

"So, presents?" I suggest, breaking it.

Rose grins. "Presents."

"Close your eyes."

Her eyes dip closed, and I reach into my pocket for the gift, dropping it into her outstretched palms. It is a small amber pendant the size of a pebble, containing a tiny, perfect rosebud.

Rose's eyes gleam, as if the thing resting in her hands is imbued with magic, and not merely a simple trinket.

"Do you like it?" I dare to ask.

"Yes," she says, her voice very faint. "It's beautiful. It's perfect."

"Then it suits you."

She brushes her hair over her shoulder and turns, gesturing for me to fasten it around her neck. My fingers skim her pale flesh, but they are incapable of such a precise action.

"I—I can't..."

Rose completes the action herself, but catches my hands before they fall away. She does not let go, and I can feel her gaze on me even though I am too embarrassed to reach it.

"Where did you find it?" she asks.

"I, er, made it. With a little help."

"Thank you."

Her hands finally drop away, but the ghost of her touch, and her words, linger still. She pulls a little black pouch out of her pocket and pries open the string, dropping something warm into my hands.

It is a polished piece of rosewood, on a leather string, fashioned in the shape of a thorn. No magic made this. She carved it herself.

And it matches mine. However different the pieces look, somehow, they go together.

"Rose, this is... this is lovely, thank you. Thank you so much."

I want to hug her, but before I can find the courage, she's looping the pendant over my head. I bend to receive it, like a knight being bestowed with a title.

"We match," she says, grinning again.

A smile pours out of me, unbidden. I cannot stop myself. Why should I stop myself? Rose has never done anything but return my smiles.

Somewhere, in the distance, a wolf howls.

"What was that?" I whisper, half-hoping I've imagined it.

"A wolf, I think."

“A wolf.” I sigh. Heaven knows where they have been all these years, whether they’ve just found a way of crawling through the boundary or have lived in suspended hibernation all this time. Either way, their return is not a welcome one. I will not be able to stalk the grounds safely tonight. “It has been years since I have heard one.”

“They were common enough back home,” Rose says, a touch of sadness dusting her voice. “I have always had a strange affinity for them.”

“You *like* wolves?”

“They sound so beautiful when they howl. Sad, impossibly lonely, but beautiful too.”

I wonder what this says about her, the lonely girl who dreams of howling. I wonder how she could be lonely with such a large family, but I don’t ask that. I’m aware how late it’s getting, how I’ve lost track of time being caught in her sweet rhythm, and I’m going to have to lock myself in the cells tonight to keep away from the wolves. I repress a shudder at the thought, trying not to fixate on the damage I can do to myself.

“I have never liked wolves particularly,” I tell her, swallowing hard. “And you wouldn’t either, if you’d ever fought with one. I wonder why they’ve returned.”

The clock chimes seven. I jolt involuntarily. “It’s getting late. We should head to bed.”

“To bed?” The disappointment flickering across her face is impossible to ignore.

“I’m... I’m tired,” I say, wishing I could think of a better excuse, wishing I could just *tell her* and be done with it and not be a liar and not be afraid. Wishing I knew which was worse. “I wouldn’t want to...”

“To what?”

“Nothing.”

“Haven’t you... did you not enjoy yourself?”

I still, struck by her words. How could she possibly think that? “Today has been... one of the very best days,” I say, with some difficulty, “I think we should leave it like that.”

“But—”

“You should stay in your room tonight.”

“I doubt that the wolves are going to come into the castle.”

“I mean it.” I snap, sudden visions of Rose being chased by wolves, or by me, coursing through my mind. “It’s better... safe than sorry. Stay inside.”

“All right,” she says, her brow furrowed. “I wasn’t going to wander out anyway.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, aware that I’ve upset her. “Shall... would you like some more cake? To take back to your room?”

“I’m not hungry.” The old stiffness, the one I remember from her first few days, frosts across her. I don’t have the time to thaw it, no matter the desire.

“Let me walk you back to your room.”

This, at least, she accepts. I feel like I can’t breathe until I know she’s safely stowed inside her chamber, away from the wolves, away from *me*.

“Goodnight,” I say, in lieu of sorry. I’ll find some way of apologising to her tomorrow, if I’m in any fit state to.

I want to kiss her cheek, like I’ve watched young people courting in the mirror do on countless occasions. I’m not even sure she’d rebuff me. But I don’t deserve it. I don’t deserve any of her.

I am a liar, and if I don’t get out of here soon, I’ll be a monster too.

I flee from the castle, racing across the grounds, conscious of the setting sun and rising moon. I don't stop to calculate how long I have to get to the graveyard where the dungeons are located.

Something moves across my path. A shadow, dark and grey. I still. A wolf. Half my size, but still powerful and strong. I could take him.

What I can't take is the two that come crawling out of the mist behind him.

I could roar, could try to frighten them off, convince them that I am the fiercer predator. But I am conscious of alerting Rose, of frightening her, or worrying her, although there is a sliver of joy I feel at the idea that she could be worried for me at all.

I stare at them, immobile, hoping that they will think the better of it, that they will turn and flee.

When they creep closer, I offer them a growl.

It does not work, and a second later a set of fangs races up to meet me.

Chapter Ten



The Wolf Maiden

I grab the first one by the jaw and fling it into the others, gaining a few seconds to run further into the grounds. If I can just lock myself in before—

The sun is almost gone. I have so little time.

They cut across my path, sending me down another, far away from where I need to be. One snaps at my back legs. I kick it in the face, crashing it against a nearby tombstone with my massive paw, cracking either stone or skull, I am not sure. The others circle round me.

Howls permeate the air, coming from the nearby woodlands. More are coming, and the pain is trickling in at my temples.

I half want it to come. I'll be more formidable then. I won't have to remember anything.

A bolt hits the ground behind one of the wolves.

I turn. Rose is there, climbing onto one of the statues, a crossbow in hand. She loads another bolt.

No. I shake my head wildly. What is she doing here?

She fires again.

The second shot hits one of the wolves in the shoulder, but it is only a graze. The arrow strikes the floor. Finally, the wolves take notice, yellow eyes training on her. She scrambles frantically at the statue, trying to pull herself into its arms, to no avail. Wolves snap at her heels.

NO.

Even though I've yet to transform and I'm fighting against the pain slowly stripping away my humanity, I lose all control of myself. I am a monster in a moment. I let out a terrific roar and tear the wolf from the pedestal, sinking my claws into its back and dragging it along the floor.

"Run!" I scream.

Rose leaps from the statue and streams back towards the castle. A sharp pain explodes in my back; one of the wolves is clamped around my shoulder. Another tears at my clothes. Fang, fur, and my own bloodied hands blur before me.

"Thorn!" Rose has stopped in her tracks, staring at me with a look of horror.

"Get to the castle!"

"But—"

I rip one of the wolves from my back and send it flying into the statue where she stood, seconds ago. Dust and stone explode into the air. I grab the other by the back of its throat and pin it against the ground. Its back legs flail wildly.

"I can handle a few wolves! Lock the door and don't come out—"

"And leave you here with them?"

"I'll be fine!" Pain splits through me. I don't have long. If I transform in front of her...

Something like a moan escapes me, from pain or the thought of hurting her, I don't know.

More wolves howl in the distance.

"Go, Rose!" I repeat, practically begging.

Rose shoots another bolt at the wolf emerging from its slump at the bottom of the statue. This time, it hits its mark.

"Rose!" I scream, my thoughts darkening, *"Leave!"*

The rest of the wolves are nearly upon us. She trembles in fear.

"Go," I hiss, charging towards them.

There is not enough left of me to check if she's gone, but as I am erased, my last thought is of her.

I think that's what makes me scream.



Sometimes, I remember what happens when I'm not me. It is far off, almost like a dream, a distorted collection of pictures and pain.

Pain.

I remember surrendering to the takeover. I remember the teeth sinking into my skin. I remember destroying them when the monster came to.

The rest is only dark, but through it all, Rose's face, a pale mask of a different kind of pain, as she stared at me in the fight.

Rose.

Morning comes, but the sensation of sunlight reaches me as though through a filter or fog. I know that it is day, but no warmth reaches me. I know it is light, but I can barely see it.

Every part of my body is connected to my mind only through the shreds of pain, otherwise, it might as well be a stranger's. I do not feel like I own it. I can

barely think. I am still half-asleep, or half-dead.

At one point, I think I hear Rose calling for me. Her voice sounds frantic. It must be a dream. She would never sound that frantic for me.

But she did face the wolves for you.

I don't know what to make of that.

I lie in the grass for I don't know how long. Eventually, I hear the soft jingle of a clock chime. It is late, later than usual. I wonder where Rose is, if she's concerned. I have never vanished on her like this before, but the castle is big. She must know I could be anywhere.

Maybe I did hear her calling.

I open my eyes.

I am down by the lake, tangled in the undergrowth, so far away from the castle that I cannot see it through the fog. With some difficulty, I prop myself up, examining my injuries. Cuts, some deep, some shallow, cover almost every inch of me. My left arm is worse; completely shredded.

If I ran into her... these could be her injuries. Or worse. So much worse.

Dragging myself upright is impossible. All fours is better, although I can barely put any weight on my left. There's a cloak nearby, left by the fairies, no doubt. I worry about putting it on, bleeding through it, so I sit for a while, willing the injuries to heal. I need to get to the fountain, but to do that, I need to be clothed. I cannot risk Rose seeing me like this.

I know I should eat something, but food seems to be beyond me right now. I feel almost feverish. I long for the others, for company of any sort, someone to be there, share this with. I am not sure I can manage on my own. I mean, I know I can, I must, but it is harder this way.

What would Rose do, if I let her see me this way?

I dwell on this thought, and too many others, until the blood is almost dried, and I summon the energy to pull myself back into my threads of humanity. It is past midday.

The pain intensifies as I trudge back through the woodlands, but I manage to shelve it.

Until I see the crossbow lying on the ground.

Rose's crossbow.

All colour, all blood, all feeling freezes inside me. What is it doing here? There's no way it was dropped in the fight and dragged here by one of the wolves; Rose was holding it when she ran. There is no reason for it to be here.

Tiny droplets of blood sit in the ground beside it. There are footprints, too. A human's.

Any reason and ration and logic leaves me. If there's a thought that there isn't enough blood, that the footprints are firm and solid without the signs of a struggle, it does not reach me.

Rose, Rose, Rose.

No, no, NO!

She wouldn't have followed me out here. Not again. She wouldn't have been so foolish, so reckless.

And if she was, it would be my fault.

Because I never told her.

Something stiffens in my chest, hardening to the point of breaking, glass in a fire. *Not her*; I beg whatever forces might be capable of mercy, *do whatever you like with me, but leave her*.

I race back to the castle, push open the main doors and stand there, catching my breath, my throat too raw to call for her.

It turns out, I don't need to. She arrives almost immediately, stopping at the top of the stairs. Her face is unreadable, pale and tight and emotionless. Her dress is muddy, her sleeves rolled up to the elbows.

She's alive, she's safe.

And I have never been more furious.

A twisted, sick feeling of relief knifes through me. I want to vomit. I want to hold her. I want to sob.

I want to scream.

She could have been killed. You could have killed her.

She hurtles down the stairs, but I don't have the strength to meet her. I am close to collapse.

"I saw your crossbow in the woods," I say numbly. "There was some blood nearby. I thought—"

"I rescued a dog," she rushes. "This morning. I locked myself in all night, just like you told me."

Pain, exhaustion and misplaced anger fuel my next words. "Why were you out in the first place?"

"Excuse me? Why was *I* out there? You were getting attacked! Why were *you* out there?"

"It doesn't matter—"

"Of course it does! You can't put yourself in danger and be mad at me for trying to help you—"

"I can look after myself."

She gestures to the wounds seeping through my clothes. "Clearly!"

"It takes more than a few wolves to defeat a monster like me."

"You are not a monster!"

"Look at me!"

"I *am* looking at you!"

The urgency of her voice shocks me. It catches at one point, a broken string on a violin. She sounds physically wounded, and my eyes rise to hers. She *is* looking at me. Unabashedly and fearlessly as always, but there is something else there, too. I cannot name it.

Rose closes the space between us, reaching for one of my hands, but I jerk it out of reach. It is covered in blood.

"Do you know a man who can rip apart wolves with his bare hands?"

"I didn't say you were a man," Rose snaps, her face white with fury. "I said you weren't a monster."

"You don't know what you say."

"Neither do you!"

Rose turns on her heels, and if I had the strength to follow her, I would. I wish for the power to claw back my words, and the bravery to tell her everything.

I have neither. I slide to the floor.



The climb up the stairs is agony, but finally I reach my door, pull off my cloak and the tattered remains of my shirt, and drop into a puddle beside the fireplace. Clothes, bandages, and a steaming bowl of water from the fountain have been laid out for me. I pick up a rag and start to dab at my wounds, trying not to seeth. Some

of them are awfully deep. Some of them I can't reach.

Hammering at the door. Rose. "Yes?" I reply, my voice unsteady.

"Is there a monster in the grounds?" she demands.

I freeze, unable to answer.

"*Is there?*"

I'm not sure why she's asking this now, what thoughts have gone through her mind since we last traded words, but panic quashes curiosity.

Yes, yes, yes. But it's me. I'm the monster everyone says I am and if you finally see me for what I am I won't be able to bear it. Not you. Not you of all people—

"*Thorn!*"

"Yes," I tell her. "There is."

"Why wouldn't you just tell me—"

I stride towards the door. "Oh, I don't know," I say, wrenching it open, "because maybe 'Oh, hello Rose, nice to meet you, I hope you enjoy your imprisonment here. I should mention, once a month the castle plays host to a ravenous monster that might eat you. Have a nice stay' is not the best way to welcome someone!"

I glare at her, waiting for some venomous reply, the retort I deserve, but she does not give it. Her face is white and large and fearful. Was I too loud? Too terrifying?

"What?" I bark.

"You... your... *Thorn*," she whispers, choking on my name.

I look down, suddenly conscious of my missing attire and shredded flesh. "It's nothing," I say, trying to disappear behind the door. "I can manage."

Rose marches into my room. "Why didn't you say anything—"

"I didn't really see the point. You don't have to help—"

"You're right, I don't. But I want to."

"Why?"

I know the answer is probably because she's good and kind, because she'd help anyone, but a part of me aches to hear that she wants to help *me*.

No, not a part. All of me. All of me wants her to want to help.

"You helped me," she says instead. "When I first came here and cut my hands. And when I fell into the ice—"

"I had help," I say shortly, slightly deflated, and not wanting to downplay the role of the fairies.

"The little... remnants?"

I nod.

"You helped me," Rose continues. "Let me help you. Please."

I sigh reluctantly, and lower myself into a chair beside the fire. Rose turns to the equipment laid aside for cleaning. As much as I don't want her to see me in this way, as much as I don't want to trouble her... I want her with me. I want her to care.

"I'm still mad at you for not telling me about the monster," she says, her voice brittle. She presses a hot cloth to the first of my wounds, and I manage to hold back a wince. She's incredibly gentle.

"I know," I reply, equally quietly. "I'm just... I'm very conscious of scaring you."

"Because I have been so easily startled this far."

"That's just it. I keep thinking, *one more thing and it'll be too much for her. No one can shoulder all of this.* I don't want to frighten you away."

"Where exactly would I go?"

“Just... away.” I swallow, glancing downwards, too frightened to watch the reaction of my next words. “You see... I rather like the part of my day with you in it.”

“Well, that’s... sweet.” Rose blinks, as if she cannot believe what I have just uttered. “I’m still mad at you,” she snips.

“Be mad then,” I say. “But just... don’t leave.” I hate how pitiful that sounds, how much her company means to me, how much I’ve come to ache for her when she is not around, but that is the truth of the matter. I’d brace the pain of her fury for the balm of her presence.

Rose moves onto a deeper set of slashes, and this time I cannot help but wince.

“Sorry,” she says. “It’s been a while since I’ve doctored any wounds like this. Freedom stopped asking me to help because I was too rough with him. He said I did it on purpose.”

“Did you?”

“Of course. He was being careless. Someone had to teach him a lesson.”

I smile a little at this, wishing I could meet this brother of hers. I’d like to see what Rose is like around others.

“What type of monster is it?” she asks gingerly.

My sigh is bone-deep. I had almost forgotten that we had to speak of this. “It does not have a name. I only know that it comes once a month, during the full moon.”

“Has it... always been here?”

I nod, trembling at how close we are to the truth, how much I long to reveal it and can’t. *No, no, don’t go, don’t leave.*

“And it attacks you?”

“Not usually. Usually it minds its own business.”

“Will it—”

“It will not hurt you,” I say sharply. “I will not let it.”

“But—”

“Just... don’t go anywhere near it. Promise me.”

“I... I promise.”

I exhale, not even tensing when she applies the water to a new set of bite marks. *She’ll be safe. I’ll keep her safe. And I’ll lock myself away next time. She doesn’t need to be afraid of me.*

You are the one who is most afraid, says a much darker voice.

Another, much more pleasant voice rises up inside me. Rose, insisting I wasn’t a monster. Insisting she was looking at me.

“What do you see?” I ask her, trying to pat down the desperation in my voice.

She blinks. “I’m sorry?”

“You said that you were looking at me, earlier, in the hall. What do you see?”

She pauses for a moment, her gaze unwavering. “You,” she says. “Not a man, not a monster. Just you. Sure, you might have big hands and claws and teeth larger than most, but you are, most categorically, *not* a monster, as you seem to insist.”

“Then what does a monster look like?”

“Like everyone else,” she tells me. “There is many a monster who wears the form of a man; it is better of the two to have the heart of a man and the form of a monster.”

“You still find me ugly then?”

“I always said you were. Not everyone can be as beautiful as me.”

How is it that she can make me laugh, even when I’m hurt, and hateful, and despising the world? I barely even notice as she cleans the wounds, the pain

dribbling away beneath her touch.

"If you have always been a beast, why should the shape of men matter to you?" she asks.

"I'm sorry?"

"You seem to be quite bothered by the way you look. I'm trying to discover why."

"I have said this before; most people appear unhappy with their outward appearance."

"But I'm asking why *you* care."

I sigh, looking down at my hands, the misshapen, inhuman paws I inhabit. Not mine, not really. Not the body I am meant to have. "I just feel as if my experiences are limited by my form... I want to be able to do the things that others take for granted. Write neatly. Paint. Ice a cake without it looking ridiculous. I don't... I don't even know what it feels like to have somebody's skin on mine..."

"You can still feel me, can't you?"

"Yes," I whisper, my voice raw with longing. "But not in the way I'd like to."

Rose's face is once again impossible, a white canvas of emotion, but ever-so-slowly, she slides her hand into mine and squeezes my fingers. I thumb hers, sliding the thick pads over her knuckles. I can feel her pressure, her warmth, but not her skin. It's but a thin gruel of sensation.

Rose tugs back her fingers and picks up a roll of bandage. "When I was very little," she says, unravelling it around my arm, "I used to be jealous of my sister, Honour. She is so beautiful, and people are drawn to her like flowers move towards the sun. I used to think that if I looked like her, people would be the same towards me. But then my mother said that people have this strange relationship with beauty; they always think it will bring them happiness. She said that that was not the case, and even if true love is fostered between beauty, true love happens but once, and it will find us regardless of how we appear. She said it did not matter if we were not loved by everyone, so long as we are loved by someone."

"I am not sure of what you are saying."

She moves the bandage around my back. "Beauty is subjective, and it does not bring you happiness. Nor does it bring you understanding, companionship... love. It is a lesson I am glad I learnt young. I stopped... I stopped trying to get people to like me. I found enjoyment in being myself. I don't think I became rude or arrogant, but I stopped caring what others thought. If people don't like you for you, then they aren't worth your time. Somewhere, out there, your people are waiting. The ones who will love you unconditionally and irrevocably."

Ariel's voice swims into my mind. *Pick one that doesn't scream at you.* Hadn't she, too, implied something like this? That there would be someone worth waiting for?

I look at her for a long a while, wondering how many people she has on her list, how small mine is in comparison. Four, if I am lucky. If they are still alive. "Is your friend, the one who kissed you at the party, one of these people?"

"First off," she replies, smirking, "I kissed *him*. And secondly... no, I don't think so. James is a dear friend, but... I have been here months and I have barely spared him a thought since I told you about him last. No, at the moment, those who love me unconditionally and irrevocably are limited to members of my immediate family, and Nanny."

And me. "You are lucky."

"To have so many?"

"Yes. And to be so sure of yourself."

“Do you really care so much about what others think of you?”

“I care about what *you* think.”

She smiles at this, like she’s hiding a secret. “Well, I rather like looking at your face.”

“I’m... I’m sorry?”

“Well, like I said, it’s definitely not pretty, but I still like looking at it.”

“W-what? Why?”

“Because it’s yours,” she says. “The face of a person whose company I have come to enjoy. I mean, my father’s pretty rough around the edges and I still like looking at him.”

I stare at her, utterly perplexed by her words. It is one thing to be indifferent to my appearance, but to actually *enjoy* it?

I’m not sure I like being compared to her father, though.

Rose places my hand against my chest. “Better?” she asks.

“Hmm? What?”

She taps the bandages. I hadn’t realised she was finished.

“Oh, yes, quite.”

Rose does not remove her hand. She stares at it, her expression unreadable. I have no idea what’s going on inside of her.

And even less so when she leans her head against my chest. “I am really glad you’re all right,” she whispers.

I remember the way she flinched in my arms the day she fell off the dresser. How different this is to that. The only thing the same is how much I don’t want to let her go. Slowly, carefully, my arms incase her. I don’t care about pulling my wounds, I just want to hold her. I want to hold her until my spirit slips out of my body and merges with hers. I want to hold her until the real me peels away and leaves this old case behind.

It was always going to be her, wasn’t it?

She alone can break my curse.

She alone can kill me.

I think about telling her everything. About Moya, about my mother and the fairies, about what am I. What she is.

Everything, everything, you’re everything.

But when she gets up and moves towards the door, all I can say is, “Thank you.”

Chapter Eleven



Hall of Mirrors

People are drawn to her like flowers move towards the sun.

It is difficult to imagine that Rose comes from a place where people do not do the same thing to her. I am conscious of what I do, whenever we are in the same room. I cannot help but move closer to her, cannot help but stare at her whenever I am certain she is not looking in my direction. Which is most of the time, alas. She is endlessly comfortable in my presence, at least, I think she is. A few nights ago she fell asleep beside me so that her head rested in my lap. It is difficult to do that with someone you don't feel comfortable with, but she doesn't move towards me like a flower does the sun. It's more, I think, the way one curls into an old blanket. For warmth, for familiarity. I am swiftly becoming like her family.

I am glad for the fearlessness of her friendship, and the closeness of her companionship, but there are some times when she leans against me that I stiffen like a knife is pressed against my skin. I am so keenly aware of how easy it would be for her to hurt me.

I once asked Grace for advice on how to make someone fall in love with me. It was similar to the fairies' advice. She laughed and told me to be myself. I told her I'd tried that.

“Then be patient,” she responded. “There is always someone who will love you for you.”

It is a lot easier to say that when it’s a lot easier to meet people.

The advice is similar to what Rose has told me. I wonder if they are from the same village, if this is the sort of thing they teach them in that part of the world. None of the other girls spouted similar doctrine.

It seems unlikely. I’ve never known the castle pick up two visitors from the same place.

I lie my head against the pillow as I struggle to sleep.

“I could really do with some advice right now,” I sigh.

There is a loud crack from the fireplace, too loud for a mere log. A spark of colour. “Ariel?” My heart sings with expectation. I’m frightened of hoping too much. I must be mistaken—

Another crack. An educated guess; it was either Ariel or Margaret. Ophelia was not one to offer advice. Margaret was less likely to waste her magic.

“You should use your magic sparingly,” I suggest, my chest tight. This is the first time I have heard any true whisper of them in almost two years. They did not last long after I drained the garden to send Grace home to her fiancé.

Two very loud cracks, like hisses.

“Thank you,” I whisper, ignoring the prickle in my eyes. “Although I don’t know what help you can offer me like this.”

The fireplace falls mute. Perhaps I have offended her. Then, a few seconds later, a book drops in front of me. A romance novel.

“Really, Ariel?”

The fireplace spits. This is a lot of magic she is using up, especially with the summoning. I should not encourage her, but I am too thankful for the company to chastise her now. It’s possible they are regaining some of their magic, with life returning to the castle. I dare to hope.

“I’ve missed you,” I say to her, or maybe the air, I am not sure. Silence fills the room once more.



The following morning, Rose introduces me to the pup she rescued. He is a scrawny, bitten, yellow-eyed thing with a mottled coat, not yet an adult but too old to be called a puppy. He snaps at us from underneath her bed.

I look at her, wondering if she’s brought a wild animal back instead. “Does he have a name?”

“Bramble,” she tells me.

I snort, noticing somewhat of a theme.

“Because I found him in a bramble patch!” she insists.

“Of course. I suppose we’ll have a cat called Briar, soon, maybe a bird called Fern... how about a fish called Petal?”

“I am not calling anything Petal,” she hisses. “Least of all, a fish! And you’re teasing me.”

“I will admit it is swiftly becoming one of my favourite past times.”

She punches me on the arm, making me wince, and then looks down guiltily, turning her attention back towards the animal. I think she’s still angry at me, which suits me fine, since I deserve it.

I’ve never had a dog before. There weren’t any in here when the castle was abandoned. We had some cats, though. When the gardens started to wane, so too did

they, as if they couldn't survive without the rodents and insects, no matter what I fed them. I tried to encourage them to leave, to find scattered holes in the gateway, and one by one all of them did. All except my favourite, Raven. She stayed until the end, growing weaker and weaker, staying by my side long after the fairies' voices had fallen quiet.

Then one morning I woke and found her next to me in the nest, stiff and cold as ice.

I buried her beneath the rosebushes, speaking a few words to her silent form.

It was the last time I spoke out loud for weeks, no longer certain there was anyone to listen.

My introduction to this new pet is somewhat limited, as he adamantly refuses to come out from underneath Rose's bed. We pass him bits of food which he snatches from our fingers before scuttling back to his den, whilst we flick through a book on canines, trying to identify his breed. We decided he is mixed, and no older than six months.

His arrival offers us a new pastime: house training. It is quite clear that wherever he has come from, he did not live with people. It takes a few days of passing him food under the bed before he accepts us as part of his pack, but convincing him of the difference between outside and in is trickier. Rose takes morning duty as he sleeps with her, and I take him out in the evening. I enjoy having someone to tear around the garden with, and even though I should probably be teaching him not to bite, I quite enjoy the way he tugs on my ears and wrestles with me on the lawns.

I enjoy that Rose likes to watch us from her window, too, although the amount I look up there, it's hardly surprising I occasionally see her looking back.

"Where do you think he came from?" she asks me one day, as Bramble chases a bee through a bush.

"I don't know," I reply. "It's possible he came through the gateway."

"I thought it only opened twice a year?"

"It usually does, but sometimes tiny holes can open up—small enough for birds, or insects..."

"Or a medium-sized puppy?"

"Precisely. Not large enough for a human, I fear."

I half-expect her to patrol the mists and search herself, looking for an exit, testing my words. She does not, and her trust burns as well as delights me.

Perhaps she is not as keen to escape as she once was.



Rain comes to the castle. For a period of almost three days, we are caught in a torrential downpour, silver flooding the garden. A coldness comes with this weather, and the sun is hidden behind a sheath of water.

Rose misses the garden, misses the warmth and the sun. She spends some time in the music room instead, trying to compose, but everything she creates sounds angry or sad or melancholy. Her fingers eke out only tragic notes, her voice devoid of any joy.

"Is there nothing I can do to entertain you?" I offer.

She smiles at me, an expression as glittering as it is sad, and says she's fine.

"You could always try exploring again. The castle might have changed a lot since the first time you did."

She decides to do just this, and I return to the library, reading from Rose's discarded pile so I can join her in praising or condemning the various stories. We usually agree with one another's verdicts, although I enjoy how heated she becomes when our opinions differ.

"It was romantic!" I'll insist.

"It was *not* romantic. It was foolish and reckless and a very bad idea. He could have died!"

"Ah, but he didn't. And if he hadn't tried, there wouldn't have been a happy ending."

"You know in real life, he'd just die, right?"

Rose does not tend to enjoy overly romantic gestures in books, which sadly does put a damper on most of my ideas.

A sudden shriek. "Thorn!"

I skid out of the library, racing towards the sound of Rose's cry. She's in the Hall of Mirrors, the gilded chamber that, despite also being the location of Moya's seal, was once one of my favourite places in the entire castle.

Rose is standing beside one of the frames, eyes wide, thankfully nowhere near Moya's mirror, the black sheet still fastened over it.

"What?" I ask. "What is it?"

"The mirror," she stammers. "It... it doesn't show my face. It showed me—"

"They're working again?" I look around excitedly.

"They're *working*?"

"The Hall of Mirrors," I explain. "Each one has the ability to show you something different. What you desire most, who you really are, what you fear—"

"I'm acquainted with that one," she says, pointing numbly.

I swallow, wishing I'd had a chance to explain it to her before then. "I'm sorry. What did you see?"

"Water," she replies, "deep, deep water."

"The lake?"

She nods. "I've never liked deep water. I don't like... not knowing what's beneath the surface, or not having my feet on the ground, or being out of my depth." She stiffens. "What do you see?"

I take a step back, not wanting to see my visions of monsters and screaming replaced with Rose's face. "I'd rather not see it with my eyes." *I'll just imagine it instead.* "Now this one," I say brightly, pulling her to a different mirror, "I think you'll really enjoy. This mirror will show you anything in the world, anything real and living." I point to the engraving at the top. *The present.* "It can show you your family, if you like."

Rose's eyes gleam. "How does it work?"

"Just step up to the glass, and ask it. You have to ask this one—there is too much in the world for it to show you otherwise."

She moves into the frame without a second's pause. "Show me my father."

The mirror swirls like ink, a man sitting at a desk in a faded old study snaps into view. He is perhaps fifty, with streaks of red, muddy brown in his mostly grey hair. There is little else of Rose in his weathered appearance, but he looks kind.

Rose presses her fingers against the glass, as if hoping to fall right through it, and watches rapturously as he turns his pages, puffing on his pipe.

"Show me Beau," she whispers.

The mirror swirls again. A golden-haired child appears in a small, cottage garden, surrounded by flowers, playing with little toy soldiers. A brown-haired girl—her sister Hope, I think—is sitting on a swing nearby, and a young man is in the

background, firing bolts against a tree. This must be Freedom, her older brother.

None of them look devastated by grief, which offers me a little comfort. They aren't all suffering without her.

"Show me Honour."

Rose's sister is a picture of serenity, sitting in a cosy parlour, gazing out of the window, knitting contentedly. She looks familiar, even though her golden-tresses set her apart from her sister. A man comes into the room, tall and handsome, and leans down to kiss her. She smiles as he takes a seat opposite. Golden wedding bands gleam on their fingers.

"She's married," Rose whispers.

"What's that?" I inch closer.

"My sister, Honour, she's married."

I know how this must upset her, not having been there for her on the day. I wonder if she's upset that she went through with it without her. "I'm sorry you missed it. Time does not always flow so perfectly between this world and that one; a part of me hoped you would be home before they missed you—"

"I'm sorry?" she startles. "Time flows differently between worlds, and you didn't think to mention it when I arrived?"

I hang my head. "I did think to mention it," I reply, "but with so little magic left in this place when you arrived, I knew that was highly unlikely to be the case this time. It would have been a false hope I was giving you. I do like to limit the falsehoods between us."

Rose's face turns rigid, no doubt hating my secrets as much as I do. "How do you know time flows differently?" she asks, jaw tight.

I look down. "I've been known to look in on my previous visitors, every now and again," I admit. "Just to see... that they're all right."

It sounds like spying, something wrong, but it wasn't that. I shouldn't even have cared what happened to some of them, but I did, at least a little. I had to know what happened to them after.

"I can understand you wanting to make sure they returned home safely," says Rose, with her usual understanding. How does she do that?

"It's not that. I just want to know... that being here didn't hurt them."

No matter how cruel some of them were, I understood why they were that way. I didn't want them to suffer. I needed to know that Penelope didn't remain afraid her entire life, that Felicity saw the world, that Isabella went back to the stage and that Angelica and Miranda made the marriages they so desperately craved. I had to see that Grace made it to her wedding.

That was the last image I ever saw in the mirrors. I didn't come back to them until after the magic started to wane, and by then it was too late. Everything was clouded over.

"It isn't your fault they come here," Rose says, a little tartly.

I sense something has upset her, either my self-deprecation or something in the images, I am not sure. "Would you like to see something else?" I offer. "That one will show you whatever your heart desires, and that one will show you—"

Rose turns to the blackened mirror. "Why is that one covered?"

"It's broken," I reply quickly. "'Tis bad luck to have a broken mirror uncovered." *It's also really disconcerting when one stares back at you.*

"What did it used to show?"

I hesitate, suppressing a shiver. "Nothing worth seeing again."

A chill passes between us. I think about telling her the truth, or explaining it better. A part of me wonders if it would even matter now if she knew *everything*.

She already says she sees me for myself.

But... she does not love me yet, and I cannot risk it. Not now.

"A mirror of desires?" Rose pipes up, pulling me from my reverie. "Lost many hours in front of that?"

"Too many."

"What did it show you?"

"A very personal question." I smirk at her. "Why don't *you* step in front of it, and tell me what it shows *you*?"

"No!" Rose blushes, piquing my curiosity. I'm beyond curious to know what her desires are. As a child, it used to show me *things*, toys and games and food, and then friends. Mother. Love.

I stopped looking after that. It was too painful.

But what of Rose's desires?

She points to another frame, dark silver and embellished with flowers. "And that one?"

"That is the Mirror of Remembrance—anyone that's passed. Then there's the Mirror of Truth—"

"The Mirror of Truth?" she interrupts. "What does that show?"

I swallow. I looked in it once, as a boy, too young to really remember. I wanted to know if the person I was in my dreams was the person I'd see in the glass. I don't remember much of my face, only that my eyes were the same, and the darkness of my fur reflected in my hair.

But the image can change. Ariel complained she looked ugly whenever she was angry, or had snapped at someone unfairly earlier in the day. Sometimes she said she used it to work out whether or not her anger was justified.

I didn't want to look after that. I didn't want to look when they called me a monster. I didn't want to *know*. I certainly don't want to look now, and see the reflection of the lies I've told.

Rose looks at me, waiting for an answer.

"That one shows you for who you really are."

With no notion of the dark thoughts darting through my mind, Rose steps in front of the mirror. Her face drops as she beholds the utterly unchanged image. "Do I look any different to you?" She frowns.

I cannot help but laugh. She looks as lovely as she is. There is so little to improve upon in either way. "You always look the same to me."

"You have a go."

I freeze. "No," I say. "I cannot."

"You can't?"

"I do not wish to see it."

"Haven't you ever... aren't you curious?"

"I am not sure I would like what it would show me."

Rose pauses for a minute, her expression unreadable. "Could you not step in front of it for my sake?" she asks. "You can close your eyes!"

She is impossible to refuse, even when I tremble at the thought of her seeing a worse version of myself.

How much worse could it be?

Perhaps it won't be worse.

And I do want her to see me.

I sigh. "You know I would do anything, for your sake."

I close my eyes and hold out my hands to be led. Rose tugs me gently into position, and I try to focus on the feel of her hands rather than the fear of exposure.

Rose gasps beside me.

“What?” I ask, fear unbound inside me.

“You should open your eyes.”

I turn to face her, opening my eyes just a fraction, enough to see her and nothing else. “I would much rather see myself through yours.”

Rose’s face is a picture of an emotion I cannot decipher and long to fall into. It’s stark and wondrous and as unafraid as ever. “I see what I already see,” she says. She leans up on her tiptoes, taking my face in her hands and pulling it down to hers, touching our noses together. Our breath mingles. It is almost a kiss. “I see that you are beautiful.”

Chapter Twelve



The Monster Unmasked

The Mirrors were once my window to everything, to learning about the world outside, and my own past. I spent hours in front of it, travelling the world, going anywhere I wished. Learning about my ancestors, and my parents.

I watched what felt like every memory of my father's in the mirror, trying to get to know him, each moment of his existence relived behind the glass. I saw him as a little boy, in the town he lived in. He had two doting parents—my grandparents—and two brothers and two sisters. I knew from the way that time moved outside of the fairy realm that they had died long before I could ever hope to meet them. Sometimes, when I was bored, I would look up what had happened to them, after my father left. He had managed to get a message to them; of course he had. My mother had magic enough to spare, then. He told them that he had gone travelling and fallen in love. They were sad, of course, that they never saw him again, but they believed he was happy.

Rose's family have no such assurances.

My father's family moved on with their lives, as did he.

My favourite memory of my his is when my mother told him she was expecting me. They had been together ten years by this point, and thought children

between them impossible. The minute she told him, he dropped down to his knees, held her tightly, and began to cry.

He never lived to hold me, but he knew that I was a boy. Fairies always know of such things. I loved watching him and mother dream of the future they had for me together, even if that future never came to be. It was proof that he was a father, *my* father, that he would have loved me. I didn't mourn too much, what never was.

Not too much.

The one thing the mirrors cannot show you is the future. Mother told me that is because the future was unset, but I know from people like Grace and the books on the Fey that our world is peppered with hints of things to come. Some are more certain than others. Grace could always predict the weather or tell where animals would be in the garden, but other things were less certain, no matter how sure she sometimes sounded.

"I'm going to marry Henry, and we're going to be very happy together, and have at least one daughter and several children."

"Hmm," I said, stroking my chin, "I believe they call that wishful thinking. Although I will wish for it with you."

She dug me in the ribs. "You'll have that too, one day."

"Thank you," I returned, not really believing it, "if only dear Henry wasn't already taken."

Grace laughed. "You know what I mean."

"I do."

"I know you think it won't happen."

"You're right."

"But it will. You are a lot easier to love than you think."

I wish I believed her, but after being ignored, scorned, and screamed at by almost all of my previous guests, it seemed an impossible dream.

Felicity was good to me, and I was half in love with her, but my heart did not break when she left. We had six months together. She was my friend. I admired her tenacious spirit and her joy of life. But she did not seep into my soul in the way that Rose has, so that the parting, the untangling of her from my side, is certain to break me.

I *have* to make her fall in love with me.

Rose is quiet for the next few days, and strangely disinterested in the mirrors, which is odd but gives me time to sit in front of them and ask to see people courting, to observe the rituals with renewed vigour. There's a lot of walking and spending time together, which we already do. I need something *different*...

I get so wrapped up in my research that I'm frequently late to dinner, and I'm only half-sure I believe Rose when she says, "it's all right." I sense something else is bothering her. There's something sad about the way she strokes Bramble's ears under the table. It's something about the mirrors themselves, the reason she hasn't returned to them.

"Are you upset... that your family didn't seem to be missing you?"

Rose looks down. "It's foolish—"

"It isn't." *Everyone wants someone to miss them.* "I'm sure they were devastated at the time. People don't always show their grief."

"I'm awful for wanting them to be hurt."

"I don't think it's awful to want to be missed." I pause. "*I'll miss you, when you leave.*" *For the few seconds it takes my heart to break. Rose, I will miss you so much I'll die from it.*

Rose looks up at me. "I'll miss you, too," she says, almost imperceptibly.

It's not quite 'I love you' but my heart hammers anyway. No one has ever missed me before, that I know of.

Although apparently Grace's spirit—if indeed that's what visits me during the night—cared enough to come back and offer me advice. That's hardly nothing, if it's real.

I have a tendency not to believe in good things, so I'm reluctant to believe in her.

The next day, I leave the mirrors alone, take Rose out in a boat on the lake, and dine with her on the terrace. I suggest cuisines from countries she has dreamed of visiting, exotic delicacies and foreign extravagances. Each meal becomes an exercise in flavour, a feast for the senses. We eat everywhere; on the balcony, beside the lake, in the gardens, by the fountain. I make my own additions to the grounds based on things she's spoken of: a rock garden filled with lavender and a swing like I saw her sister on in the mirror. Knowing her wistfulness for her nanny's home-cooked pies, we harvest fruit together from the orchard and bake dozens of wonky, bursting monstrosities, which taste a lot better than they look and pair beautifully with sunsets, mulled wine and fine company.

I convince her to return to the Hall of Mirrors and set up a cold, buffet-style supper, pulling in several rugs and cushions, and request one of the mirrors show us a play. It is a miraculous thing to behold, and we lose hours in front of it, soaking up our favourite stories coming to life, and discussing how we would have done it differently if we were directing.

Rose is amazed. "You didn't... you didn't spy on my childhood, did you?" she asks one evening.

"The mirrors would never show me what you would not allow me to see," I explain, a little hurt that she thinks I'd break her privacy like that. "Why? What gave you that impression?"

"The food I've always wanted to eat... the swing like the one I have at home... the plays I adore... I thought you might have got them from watching me."

"You've mentioned the swing before," I explain. "And I know you love the idea of travelling. I cannot take you to other places, but I thought the cuisine might appeal. As for the plays, you are very forthcoming with your preferences there—" I stop. Rose is looking at me intensely. "What is it?"

"That's... that's... thank you," she mutters, as if the words can't quite convey how she feels. I know, in that moment, I've moved her, at least in some way. Her gratitude warms the pit of me.

"You're welcome."

She swallows, and diverts her eyes around the room. "What *were* you looking at then, if not my life?"

"Inspiration, mostly," I admit. "Things to do to... entertain you." To *court* you.

I am not sure she understands this.

Maybe I should have said, 'court'.

Rose turns back to the performance playing in the mirror before us, and rests her head against my shoulder. My heart beats so furiously I'm surprised she can't hear it. I wonder if I should put my arm around her. I *want* to put my arm around her. I want to put it there and never let go.

"I've missed this," she says quietly.

"Watching plays?"

"Being close to someone." Her voice is soft as ember. "You know," she adds hurriedly, "being physically close to someone. Like my sisters, for instance."

I am not sure I want to be compared to her sisters, but I'm also not sure that's what she means at all. And I'm flattered she wants to be so close to me.

I laugh. "Ah, Rose, you truly know how to compliment a man!"

Rose's mouth freezes into a smile, and she leans forward and kisses my cheek. She smells of earth and ash and firelight.

"What was that for?" I ask, struggling to keep my voice steady. I'm glad my fur hides what is doubtless a blush rising to my cheeks.

Rose smiles, climbing to her feet. "If you have to ask, you shall never know." She twirls towards the door.

"But... where are you going?"

"An evening walk," she announces. "Are you coming?"

As if I could ever say no. I feel like I could follow this girl to the ends of the earth.



That night, I dream of Grace again. She meets me in the sunset-covered gardens, her face beaming.

"She kissed you," she says.

I rub my cheek, feeling flesh, not fur, the weight of her lips somehow crawling into the dream with me.

"That wasn't quite a kiss."

"Oh? Did you not enjoy it?"

"Of *course* I enjoyed it... and you're teasing me."

"It's terrific fun."

A vision of Rose appears before us, tending to the gardens. Grace watches with a rapture similar to mine. A dream. This must be. Only a dream.

"She likes you," Grace says.

"I believe that much. But it's not enough."

"She knows you're keeping something from her. She can't let go until then."

I sigh. "You're a very pleasant manifestation of my conscience."

"I can be unpleasant, if you think that'll work better?"

I scoff. "Now you sound like Ariel."

Grace shakes her head. "You really need to start listening."

The garden—and the dream—fades to black.



I ponder on Grace's words all the way to the next full moon, waiting for the chance to explain to Rose, for the right words, the right moment. I wish I could write them down, but I can't, so I pace in front of the mirrors instead.

The rehearsals make me feel sick.

I plan another evening down by the lake, the night before. Rose is in a good mood, having just finished the last in the series of a book series she's been reading for seven days straight, and found it utterly perfect. She's carrying the conversation entirely by herself and has no idea of my nerves. Finally, she finishes her deconstruction and drops down in a contented sigh, placing her head in my lap.

"Today has been perfect," she murmurs.

I'm in no mood to spoil it for her, so I give her a few moments of peace, stroking back her hair. I tug at one of the curls and distract myself in the way it springs back into place.

"Rose?"

"Hmm?"

I stroke her hair a little longer, not looking at the face pressed against my leg.

"The... the last thing I want to do is frighten you, but you need to know, that monster you saw in the grounds? It's me. Well, not *me*, but a version of myself. The version I should be. This is hard to explain, but I'm... I'm still me. I promise. I wouldn't hurt you. I'd die before then. Oh, Rose, I'm muddling this all up, see—"

I glance down to gauge her reaction so far, but she's immobile, her eyes closed.

She's asleep.

I sigh, shifting her into my arms, and carry her back to the castle.

It is almost impossible to let her go.



Cowardice grips me the next morning. I try to distract Rose with more walks and thrills and plays, but it does little to elevate my own mood. I am restless and lethargic all in one. Even Bramble seems to sense that something is amiss. He skirts around me all day, hiding behind Rose.

"I'm still me," I whisper to him, when Rose is distracted. "I won't hurt you. Or her."

I'm still me.

Still a liar, you mean?

Rose takes a long, solitary walk and tends to the garden. I watch her trying to teach Bramble to fetch, but to little avail. He prefers to horde his sticks. Back inside, she fidgets with a tablecloth she's making for our parlour, tidies and sweeps even though the room could not be clearer. I read out passages from my latest book, and we make polite and awkward conversation.

"I think we should try and start measuring Bramble," Rose remarks. "He's getting so big, and it's only been a month!"

She's right, but I can't think of much to say about that.

"Perhaps we should throw *him* a party, next."

I mumble something non-committal, conscious of gathering darkness.

We retire early to our chambers.

"Please lock your door tonight," I plead.

"Promise me you won't go outside."

I swallow. "I can't... I can't promise that. If I think you're in danger... I may act rashly." I'm laying the grounds for another lie, and I hate it, playing the hero when I'm clearly the villain.

"And what if I think you're in danger?"

I wish I could smile at that. I wish I could take any kind of joy from it. *Dear, sweet Rose. I am not worth protecting.* "No more taking on monsters for my sake," I tell her. "You promised. Stay away from it, whatever you see. Whatever you hear."

She nods slowly, and closes the door softly behind me.

I make my way down to the cell with plenty of time, undressing slowly and folding my clothes on the table outside. I lock myself in and lie down, waiting. The only thing I haven't removed is Rose's necklace. I hold the thorn in lieu of her.

I long for voices again, for anything to pierce the silence, to disrupt the gathering darkness as it thickens around me, uncoiling that old, familiar pain.

You really would think I would be used to it by now.

At least, this time, I don't have to worry about not screaming. I throw back my head and howl.



A sound cuts through the dark haze, calling my name, snatching at some slither of sanity I didn't know I possessed. I am still a monster. My claws scrape against the stone. It's like I am trapped inside my own body. I want to split out of it, but I'm imprisoned in flesh. My muscles feel like stone.

I cannot move.

"Thorn?"

Rose?

No, no, she can't be here—

A growl falls from my chest. No, not mine, not right now.

"Leave me alone!" Rose hisses. Who is she talking to? I cannot turn my head, but I snatch a glimpse of her swatting at something. "I'm trying to help him!"

No, no! Don't try to help me—

I hear the sound of keys against the lock, the door swinging opening.

"Thorn?"

More light fills the chamber.

"Are you hurt?"

Run, Rose!

I fix every part of my mind on the action of staying as still as possible, hoping against hope to stop it, to prevent this awful scene from unwinding before me. Why can I see all of this? Why make me *watch*?

Has Moya found some way to make this possible, her old methods of torture no longer enough?

My actions do nothing, and the face turns towards her.

And there it is, the cliff face of terror I have been so afraid of. The utter horror stamped across Rose's face.

The monster emits a low growl, and lunges forwards.

Rose screams, throwing the candlestick in its face as she breaks towards the door. I feel a sharp slice of pain, and nothing else. She kicks the bars closed, pulls a sword from somewhere, and hurtles back up the passageway.

She only gains a few seconds with the candle and the door, and a few more slamming the dungeon door shut, but there is no way to bar it. The monster—we—barge through it in a few, short thrusts.

Rose streams towards the castle, still shrieking my name. Does she honestly not understand yet?

She will. She will soon.

Run, Rose, run!

She reaches the castle, us snapping at her heels. She wheels round to shut the door, but our arm reaches out to claw at her. We touch only air, thank goodness.

Rose lets out a hard, sharp gasp, and I catch a sliver of her gaze in the gap. She's staring at the rosewood thorn, sitting against my chest.

She knows. She finally knows.

Something hot and bright streams into our eyes, a fiery dart. We yowl in pain.

“I don’t want to hurt you!” Rose cries.

As if she could. As if she’s any match for this sheer, monstrous form.

A flash of silver. The sword. I recall watching her in the armoury, that first morning. Maybe she isn’t so helpless after all.

Do it, I beg her. Strike me in the chest. End this. Don’t... don’t let me hurt you.

If there’s a logical thought there, the one that knows I’ll die if she dies anyway, it doesn’t reach me then. No thought does apart from the crawling, desperate need to keep her alive and in this world and fling me from it.

There are far worse things than death.

We wrestle against the door, fighting against some unseen force. Rose swipes the blade across our paw. Blood splurts into the air, and we yank the injured limb away from the door, giving her enough time to dash for the stairs.

She does not get far. We fling open the doors and burst into the hall, leaping up the stairs in three short leaps and cutting across her path.

Stop this! I yell inwardly, at no one. *Please, please, I’ll do anything—*

She hurls the sword in our direction and hurtles down the path still available to her, knocking over suits of armour, stone busts, whatever she can. A piece of debris catches her ankle and she slams against the floor, turning as we tower over her.

The look she gives me shatters my chest. It is everything I feared and far, far worse.

I don’t care. Hate me. I deserve it. Only get out. Move. Run. Save yourself and anything that remains of my heart.

Out of nowhere Bramble comes flying. His teeth clamp around our arm, teeth sinking into flesh. Neither of us really notices the pain, not anymore. The free hand wrenches him loose and flings him to the side.

“Bramble!” Rose screams.

He is up again with barely a whimper, this time going for the leg. Rose bolts upright and streams towards the door at the end of the chamber. Mother’s door.

The haze thickens, or perhaps there is too much going on. I’m trying to watch Rose, we’re fighting Bramble, there’s a buzzing sound all around us, and something shifts above.

A chandelier comes crashing down. We leap out of the way, glass exploding everywhere. Bramble lies whimpering in the corner.

Rose disappears into the room, slamming it shut behind her. We pound against the door, but somehow, it’s already locked. I hear the sounds of Rose yanking furniture across the room.

I pray the door holds.

Be safe, be safe, be safe.

The monster keeps hammering, unable to give up its prey.

Leave her. Leave her be.

Three tiny balls of light hover around me. For a moment, I think I’m imagining them. I’ve conjured them from memory to give me some form of comfort, although I’m far from deserving of it.

But when they hiss against my eyes, I realise I haven’t imagined them at all. They’re really here. They hum against my face, quietly buzzing, lulling not just me but the monster, too. The fury drops to a quiet anger, and it falls away from the door.

A sound reaches me from the chamber, the quiet tinkle of a lullaby, the one my mother used to sing for me, long, long ago. Rose must have found the music box. The sound shivers into my bones. The monster quietens.

Then, even more miraculously, Rose begins to sing. "*Home is the sweetest of places...*" She stops, as if she cannot remember the words that come next. She shouldn't know it at all; it's an odd Fey ditty. Perhaps passed on through the generations. "*You are safe, I am here, this is home.*"

Chapter Thirteen



Laid Bare

When I was around six or seven, I got covered in mud, and was forced into a bath I really, really didn't want. The fairies were insistent, and eventually I screamed out, "stop it! I command you to stop!"

I do not know where the words came from, but I remember with perfect clarity how they immediately snapped back, like magnets repelled away from me.

I laughed, thinking it a game. A game where they would do anything I told them to.

So I told them to dance. I told them to fill the bath with more mud. I demanded they bring me sweet treats and let me stay up past bedtime. I didn't understand that it wasn't a game, that they were sworn to obey me in the way they were my mother.

And if I did understand that, I relished it.

But then I woke in the middle of the night from a nightmare, and went to seek out Margaret. I found her sobbing beneath my mother's portrait.

"I'm sorry, Eilin. I don't know what to do. Did I raise him wrong? How can I help him understand?"

I didn't quite get it, but I knew I'd done something to upset her. I shuffled into the room and onto her lap, apologising profusely.

The understanding came later. I swore I'd never order them again, that I would never alter their will. I broke that oath, of course, with a lot of barking at them to leave me alone, particularly during my teenage years, but I never forced them to do obscene things like dance at my behest.

If I could command them now to come back, I would.

But I do not have that power.



I think I can hear Ophelia speaking in her high, child-like voice. A dream, surely.

"Six others have come before her, and not a single one has ever ventured out of their room for any of the nights," she squeaks.

"Which either makes her very brave, or very stupid," says Margaret, in her strict, matronly voice.

A third voice. Ariel. "She left because she cared."

"Silly girl doesn't know what's good for her."

"Whose side are you on, exactly?"

"I'd just rather see her gone than dead."

"You know what will happen if she goes."

"It's never happened so far."

"He has never loved any of them before."

The door clicks open, and I feel a warm buzz shift past me. I try to lift out my hand to stop them, but my arms feel like lead.

No, no, don't go—

I peel open my eyes, but they're already gone.

My eyes sink shut again.

Bramble shuffles forwards and sits down beside me, licking my wounds. I murmur an apology for the night before, relieved he's all right. He nuzzles my cheek. What is wrong with dogs, that they constantly seek the approval of the masters that beat them?

I hear Rose emerge from the bedroom, and brace myself for her fury.

She stands over me, not speaking. Perhaps her anger is beyond words. Perhaps she's too afraid to speak. I think about saying nothing, letting her walk by, letting her go back to her room and just waiting until my heart breaks from wanting her. It would be easier than facing her.

"Please tell me I didn't hurt you," I say, when she says nothing still. "Just tell me that."

Slowly, silently, something is draped around my shoulders. A blanket, warmed by her closeness. She crouches down beside me. I stiffen at her proximity, and then start to tremble at the sheer lunacy that she isn't running away. Tears of relief and exhaustion rattle out of me. I feel sick with it.

"I'm not hurt," Rose says, her voice steady. She touches the back of my hand, making me wince. "I am sorry about your hand. You'll have to let me bandage it."

"As long as you're all right—"

"I am not all right," she snaps. "I said I was unhurt, not all right."

The anger is what I was expecting. The anger is easier to face. I move carefully into a sitting position, still avoiding her gaze. "I would sooner die than let any harm come to you."

"I know. I know you would."

"If you had only stayed in your room—" I regret the words as soon as I say them.

"No! No, Thorn, I am not a child! You cannot shut me away! I came out looking for you because I did not *know*. If you had only told me—"

"I did not want you to know that I was a monster—"

"You are *not* a monster!"

"There is an equal measure of despair and delight I feel at your utterance of those words, but I assure you, Rose, once a month I truly do shed any semblance of humanity."

"Well, once a month I'm not that much fun to be around either."

I stare at her, almost wanting to laugh, completely flummoxed by her words and the utter madness that she is still here, that she doesn't care that I'm a monster, that what has hurt her most was my very human lies.

"Why... why did you come out last night?" I ask her.

For the first time, fear flickers across her face. "There... there was a face in the mirror," she tells me. "The same face from the lake. The horrible, twisted face. I ran out to find you and... I heard you screaming."

"You can't possibly have heard me all the way—"

"But I did."

It's not possible. Not by mortal means. Although I suppose it might not be beyond Moya's magic, sent to bring her to doom.

We were lucky, so lucky, that it has ended this way.

"This face I saw..." Rose continues. "She's the dark fairy, isn't she? The one who started the war, brought ruin on the fairy people, and was trapped here as a result."

I prickle at the thought of her. "She ought to be dead by now. Or as powerless as a ghost. But somehow she still clings to life. A dark remnant of her former self, imprisoned in this castle. Just like me."

Rose swallows. "Are you... are you like her? Is that why you look—"

"I am one of her creations," I admit. "A monster she made to inflict misery on her enemies. I should be... what you saw last night. That is the way I am supposed to be, but for the mercy of the fairy queen."

"The lady in the portrait." Rose's eyes drift back into the chamber, to Mother's portrait. "All right."

"You don't seem... surprised by all this."

"I live in an enchanted castle."

"Yes, quite. Well, the castle is under a curse."

"Oh my, do you really think so?"

I glare at her. This is not the time for jokes. "I am trying to be serious here, Rose."

"Sorry."

"I told you once that this place was a prison," I continue, and tell her all that I can. "I don't think I explained for whom. You see, after the great battle was fought, the Queen of the Fairies, fearing for the lives of her people, cast them out into the realm of men, and imprisoned those who fought against her within the walls of the castle. She then gave up her own life to ensure that was where they remained. But over the years, her endeavours drained all magic from all lands, and placed a curse upon the place she once called home."

"What... what happens when the curse is broken?"

"Life returns to the castle. The lights regain their forms. Magic is free to walk the world once more."

“And... the shadows?”

“They die, hopefully.”

“And... you?”

“What about me?”

“You turn into a monster once a month,” she says calmly. “We haven’t yet talked about why that is.”

I sigh. “The Queen, she... she made me what I am. Human on the inside, save for one night a month when dark magic is at its peak.”

“Why?”

“Sorry?”

“Why did she save you, if you were one of the dark fairy’s creations?”

A silence grips me. This is the one thing I cannot explain, because if I tell her I am secretly a fairy prince, and she falls in love with me under the expectation of breaking the curse, *it won’t work*. It is the one thing I cannot tell her.

“You know, I’ve often asked myself the same question,” I say. I know why she did it. But sometimes I really wish she hadn’t. I wish she had known the suffering it would have caused and left me utterly mindless. “You’ve seen my true form now. Do you see now, why I told you I was a monster?”

Rose’s face is white, and she cannot look at me. “Have you ever hurt anyone?”

Another question I have dreaded. “Yes,” I reply. “Never willingly, never wantingly, always apologetically... but I still did it. It never mattered to me that I had no choice, that I couldn’t help it. Only a monster could do what I did.”

“Only a monster could do that *and not care*.”

I cannot think of anything to say to that. I don’t think my guilt rubs away what I’ve done.

“How... how is the curse broken?” Rose continues.

“The details are a little... hazy. It was said that only a young woman, fierce in soul and fair of heart, could break it. Every time the gateway opens, it has pulled in another maiden.”

“And... and what is she supposed to do?”

“I am unsure,” I tell her. I know she has to fall in love with me, but I think there’s more to it than just the feeling. There’ll be an action involved. A declaration. A kiss. “But I am fairly sure you are doing something right.”

“Because of... the garden?”

“The entire place. The mirrors, the magic, the light... Life returned to this place, once you came.”

“Slowly though,” she says quickly.

“I was once told all the best things happen slowly.”

“I still... I still don’t feel like I’m doing anything though.”

“But you must be,” I press, unable to fully contain the desperation in my voice. “*You must be*.”

Rose almost buckles under the intensity of my gaze, and I break away from her.

“When you transform, what’s it like?” she asks.

“Painful,” I admit, after a pause. “It shouldn’t be. My form doesn’t change. The pain is all in my head. But it is... unpleasant.”

“And... are you inside, the whole time?”

“I’m not... I’m not sure. The night after, I always seem to remember it, but like one does a dream. Hazy. You might have noticed I’m never myself the day after.”

“You hurt yourself.”

“Yes, usually trying to get out, if I’m caged. I don’t... I don’t usually bother with that, when it’s just me here. When there’s nothing else living about, I don’t seem to be a danger. The first few full moons you were here for, I didn’t lock myself away. I had forgotten what could happen until you told me that you’d heard me.”

She strokes the scars on my arm, sending shivers through me. “These were for me, then.”

“The lesser of two evils, I assure you.”

Rose drops her head, half-shaking it, as if she doesn’t agree. She turns her attention to the wound on the back of my hand, gently caressing the unspoilt flesh around it. “Will you argue with me if I insist on doctoring you?”

“I am slowly learning that there is no point in arguing with you.”

Part Three

Summer



Chapter Fourteen



A Kiss Among the Roses

“Let’s reach an agreement,” Rose says at dinner time, after I am clean and rested. “I will not even leave my room the night of the full moon. No matter what I hear. But I want to be the one to lock you in the cell at night.”

I blink at her. “Is this some form of revenge?”

“No. It’s because if I lock you in, I’ll know that you’re safe, too. I’ll be happier then. I won’t convince myself something else is happening.”

I don’t know how to process that.

Rose barrels on. “And... and let me stay with you.”

“What?”

“Not all night. I did promise, after all. But... let me share that with you. You don’t... you don’t need to be alone in that. Not any more.”

My chest tightens. “Any... anything else?”

“Yes,” says Rose, looking down at her feet.

“What is it?”

She squares up to me, her eyes vivid. “If you ever lie to me again, I’ll kill you. I swear it.”

I swallow, imagining her turning the crossbow she once brandished at the wolves on me. I don't doubt her words. "If I ever lie to you again, I'll deserve it."

"Good," she says. "If you can't tell me the truth about something—if you're not ready—that's different. But tell me, and I won't pry."

Aside from that conversation, I rest for most of the day, recovering and dealing with the raw exposure of my secret and Rose's impossible reaction. Of course she forgives me. Of course she understands. I half hate her for it, and half love her all the more.

If she doesn't save me, she will kill me.

I need some time alone to process what has just transpired, although Bramble spends the day beside me, and the silent, hovering forms of the fairies visit me at least twice.

The following day, Rose asks if any of the other guests came close to breaking the curse. My answer is swift, unthinking.

"No."

"How can you be so sure? Did the gardens not—"

"It took a long time for magic to vanish entirely from this place. The gardens were the last thing to start crumbling. They could not be used as an indication."

"Then how could you tell that they didn't come close?"

Because I never loved any of them. And they certainly did not come close to loving me. "Quite frankly, most of them did not really care," I tell her, hoping to offer a hint without giving too much away. "They did not engage with the castle—or me—in the way that you have."

"And... all of these girls... They all chose to return to their families when the time came?"

This seems an odd question. Of course they did. Why wouldn't they? "Can you blame them?"

"Does the portal never open again in the same place?" asks Rose, not meeting my gaze.

"It can do. It has several places it er, docks, as it were. It has opened in the same place before."

"Is... is there any way to control it?"

"Possibly," I reply. "Why do you ask?"

"Because... because I was thinking... perhaps... of coming back to see you, a couple of times a year. If... if I may?"

"You... you want to see me again?"

"Of course I want to see you again!" she snaps.

I stare at her for a long while, certain I've misheard.

"Did... did none of them express a desire to do the same?" she asks.

"One or two of them promised to, but then a year passed, or two, and they forgot. Moved onwards, as they should." Felicity. Grace. Although for the latter, I'm not sure she forgot or if she died before she could. I do not know how much time lapsed outside.

"I cannot believe that not one looked back."

"Can you not?"

Rose squirms in her seat. "Thorn, when..."

"Yes?"

I inch forward, waiting for her to promise something different, wondering if I'll believe her. It would be pointless, of course, as I'm certain to die when she departs from this place, but it would be something to hope for.

“When I go...” she continues, “it won’t be easy. I... I don’t want it to be forever.”

Hope pounds in my chest. “It goes without saying, that I don’t want it to be forever, either.”

She swallows, puckering her lips. “I’ve grown quite fond of you, you know.”

“And I, of you.”

As if the word *fond* could ever aptly explain how much I adore her. I am *fond* of flowers. I am *fond* of animals. Rose is something else entirely, a divine, human anchor, my blade and my bandage.

Rose looks like she wants to say something else, but instead she mutters about a garden task that requires immediate attention and sweeps swiftly out of the room.

I wonder if I am not the only one concealing things.



A few days later, one of the fairies—Ophelia or Ariel, judging from the energy by which she buzzes around my head—comes to me just before lunch time.

“What? What is it?”

She darts around the room and hovers by the door, and I sense I am to follow. She leads me up to the roof garden.

The scent of summer floods the air. I am enveloped in colour. Pink, white, red, purple, yellow, orange... roses in every shade, style and shape. More than a season blooms in this place. It’s like pure sunlight, pure life.

I race to find Rose. She’s in the parlour, reading in the window seat, her skirts spilling over the cushions. She looks so peaceful it’s half a shame to disturb her, but I know I’ll be forgiven.

“I have something magnificent to show you!” I rush, my voice much higher than I’d like. “Come on!”

I bound out of the room, slipping and sliding, before scooting back in to check if she’s following. “Come on!”

“What is it?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“You cannot top the library, Thorn.”

“This might come close.”

She shrugs, putting on a smile as she follows me up the stairs. I emerge a few seconds before her, turning to capture the sheer look of amazement on her face as she steps into the light. A face of pure joy and wonder, so rapt that she can barely speak.

I would look at her that way, if I had a human face.

Maybe one day, says a voice I hardly dare to believe.

“Roses have always been my favourite,” I say, my words as soft as a touch, “even before I met you.”

Rose stands beside a pink rosebush, stooping to sniff the bloom, admiring the satin sheen of the petals. I draw towards her, unconsciously but so abruptly that she bolts upright, snagging her finger on a thorn.

“Ouch!”

I grab her hand, tugging her towards the fountain. “Over here.”

The wound, being so small, vanishes almost as soon as it touches the water. Rose pulls out her finger, staring at it. “Healing waters?”

I grin. “Healing waters. Blessed by the fairy queen herself.”

“How convenient.”

“Well, it won’t heal any serious wound, but nicks and scrapes it can manage.” I massage her finger. “You should be more careful when admiring roses. I hear they can be dangerous.” I try not to smile too smugly at my own choice of words.

Rose smiles, almost as smugly, glancing at my pendant. “Personally, I’ve always rather enjoyed them for their thorns.”

I laugh, fighting against the warmth in my chest. “You are an odd creature.”

“As are you.” She taps my chest, sending liquid fire shooting through me. “Luckily, we’re rather of the same oddness, so I rather think we suit.”

How much I love and hate her for comments like that. *Yes, yes we are the same. And different. Too different, still.*

I turn away from her. “I got your rosebud up here, for your necklace,” I say, filling the silence.

“That was months ago!”

“They certainly took their time. I wasn’t sure they would bloom at all. They were the last thing that dried up, you know. The last to come back. It is my favourite place in the entire castle.” I look at her, and she’s smiling at herself. “Let me show you why.”

There is a ladder at the edge of the garden which leads to a small platform, almost like a gazebo. I let her go first. It is the highest point in the castle. You can see for miles, the ever-changing mountains, the blue skies, the streams and lakes and trees and meadows.

But I am uninterested in the view. It is her reaction I crave. Her expression in the light is one of the few of hers I have come to understand. It is perhaps my favourite; wonder. Pure, unadulterated wonder, as if this sight is the most beautiful thing she has ever seen. There is a soft sheen in her eyes, but no sadness. Her eyes look beyond, not inward. She is not thinking of home, or anything, really. Her face is as still as a canvas.

If I had a face—a real, human face—it would mirror hers in this moment. But I am not looking at the view. I am looking at her.

Her skin shines like moonlight, her eyes glittering like pools of water. I want nothing more in the world than to place my hand against her cheek, and press my lips to hers. For a moment, I imagine it. The minute our flesh meets, my fur vanishes. I am stripped of my trappings, undone, unravelled, reborn, revealed. My ugliness will melt away under her beauty. I am sure, for one, brief, beautiful second, that the minute my skin touches her, we will spark into life like chips of flint. Our hearts would explode in our chests.

But would hers?

Of course, I will never touch her, not like that. I am afraid of the look on her face afterwards, the look of revulsion, disgust... fear. I like the way she looks at me now. I would not risk it for anything.

Not even my life.

“I think we can say, quite certainly, that the magic has returned to this place,” I say, appearing beside her. I swallow a sigh. There is probably enough magic to send her back, to open the gateway myself. I decide against telling her this, because of what it will cost. I am almost certain that she would never let me do it, if she knew about the sacrifice, but there is always the chance, the niggling doubt, that she won’t care.

I need a little more time with her. A little more. Please.

“When the solstice comes, the gateway should be clear,” I tell her. “You will have several hours with which to make your escape.”

“What do you mean?”

“When you came here before, the way closed almost immediately. There was not enough magic to keep it open any longer. This time, I think it will be open for a while.”

“Oh, good.”

The hope beating against my chest hurts, and I look at her, begging for more.

“I don’t want to have to rush.”

My heart thumping, I slide a hand slowly across her cheek. It stays there, half in her hair, half on her skin. Our gazes thread together, her eyes greener than spring. I want to paint her. I want to capture her image and fold it between the pages of a book. Words cannot do her justice.

My throat feels dry. If I cannot speak, I need to show her.

“Stay here,” I request, my voice husky. I leap off the platform and disappear into the rose bushes. “No peeking!”

I start to pluck the flowers, a pair of secateurs appearing before me. Rose stays up on the platform, gazing out, her fingers brushing her necklace. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her take it off.

“How did you make this, when you say your hands are so clumsy?” she calls down.

“I had help,” I reply, as the fairies buzz around me. One of them hands me a ribbon to wind the flowers into a bouquet. “From our little fairy friends.” I climb back up the top, the three of them coming with me. They dart around Rose’s face.

“Oh, hello!” she squeals. “How nice to see you again!”

I grin, extending my free hand out to touch them. “It’s been a while, old friends.”

“How did they help you if you couldn’t see them?”

“Just because we cannot see someone,” I say, “doesn’t mean they aren’t there. They’ve been here my whole life, keeping me fed and the castle as upright as possible... fixing chains and tying ribbons.” I present her with the bouquet, her eyes lighting up in such a way that desperate hope flames inside me.

“Thank you,” she breathes, clutching them to her chest. She admires them for a long moment. “You truly have a talent when it comes to arranging flowers! You’re extremely good with colour.” Something flickers in her face. “Wait here.”

She disappears back down the stairs. The fairies hover in the space she occupied, and one turns to me as if to say, “what?”

I shrug my shoulders. I have no idea. I try to focus on the view, but it isn’t the same without her. Nothing is.

Eventually, I hear the sound of her banging up the steps, dragging something behind her. She appears with an easel, paints, and a blank canvas.

I frown as I help her set everything up. I don’t recall her mentioning being a painter. “What... what are you doing?”

“Painting!”

“You want to paint?”

“Actually, I’m a terrible painter, but I can sketch well enough. You’re doing the painting.”

“Me?” I take a step back. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea—”

“Well, how will you know until you try?”

There is nothing I can say to that. I concede silently, loading different paints into the tray while Rose sketches the outline of the garden. Carefully, gently, I pick up a brush and begin to mix the colours. Perfect shades begin to emerge.

Rose pushes me into the seat when her outline is done. It is a small, spindly stool, conjured here by the fairies, and groans under my weight. It makes me feel

even more ridiculous than I already do, holding up a trembling brush I'm sure to break.

The tip divides against the canvas, leaving a splurge of red on the page. My first stroke and it's already ruined. I look up at Rose, desperate for her to see that this is a terrible idea.

"Try it without the brush," she suggests instead.

Is she mad? "Without the brush?"

Rose loads her little finger with a small measure of red, leans over my shoulder, and presses it against the white. Her breath brushes against me, but I try to focus on her instructions. She steps back, and I follow her example, coating my nails in various shades and dragging them along the canvas.

The roses begin to bloom. I layer the canvas with colour, oranges and reds. I smear blue over the skies, rubbing clouds into life. Rose picks up a tiny brush and assists with some small, fiddly bits—tiny lines, little more. Before long, not a spot of white remains.

Rose steps back to admire it.

"It's messy," I say. It's nothing like the still lifes that decorate the halls of the castle.

Rose shakes her head. "Oh no, it's wonderful! It doesn't have to be perfect to be beautiful."

"Do you really like it?"

Rose nods, as if speechless with the same kind of wonder that gripped her from the platform. But there's no way I could create that wonder within her, not with something I made.

"Do you want it?" I ask.

"More than anything."

We are both so close that I can make out every tiny freckle across her cheeks. She leans forward to rub away a spot of paint on my nose, but her hand stays on my face. For a long moment, neither of us says anything.

She is so impossibly, utterly beautiful, especially in moments like these, with a smile that seems to strip away her layers right down to her naked mind. I see her soul bared behind those eyes, behind the glances she bestows on me. Her heart smiles at mine.

I want to drink her in.

In moments like these, when I see her so keenly, I am fooled into thinking she feels exactly the same. I feel, for a minute, it is printed as clearly as text, as solid as stone. A fundamental truth.

My throat aches. All of me aches with wanting her. "I wish I was a human man, and had human lips, so that I might kiss you."

Rose blinks at me, and I wait for the inevitable revulsion, the horror. The snort of derision.

Instead, she merely smiles. "Who says I'd let you?" she says, and punches my arm. Still grinning, she drops away from me, and runs for the steps.

Chapter Fifteen



Child of Grace

I told her I wanted to kiss her.

She didn't panic. She didn't run away. She didn't look remotely horrified or disgusted or scared. A little shocked, perhaps, then the echo of a smile...

I should be relieved. Rather than recoil, she thumped me playfully and moved along, unabashed, unfazed.

But she didn't return the sentiment either. It meant nothing to her.

I look at my face in the mirror. A sigh falls out of me. Can I blame her? My mouth is a frightening display of fur and fang. It is not meant to touch human lips. It is not meant to touch hers.

And yet, of course, it is. Somewhere, underneath this face I wear, is another face. My true one. One that is meant to touch hers, and not just because it's a human one, but because it's *mine*. I feel so certain in that belief for a moment, that the pain of its vague impossibility takes a while to kick in.

I am meant to kiss Rose. I am meant to be with her.

Who says I'd let you?

She laughed when she said it, like it was a joke. She didn't recoil, but... she has clearly not thought about kissing me, and if she has, she clearly didn't like the idea. Would she feel different, if I were a man?

The point is, it doesn't matter. She has to love me this way, no other.

My sleep is troubled that night, and does not come easily. When it does, I dream we are back on the rooftop together. I stroke her cheek again.

"I wish I was a human man, and had human lips, so that I might kiss you."

Rose flashes me a dazzling smile. "If you were a human man, I'd let you."

I realise my hand has been transformed into flesh, that I *am* a human man. Rose says nothing of this transformation, like she has known it all along. She keeps smiling at me—

I bend my head towards hers.

A dark cloud overhead. The sound of glass shattering. A scream, a roar, a noise far worse than mine.

"No!"

I wake in the dark. The room is hot and still, the night air as thick as mud. I fumble for water and guzzle thirstily, shaking myself from the memories equal parts dream and nightmare. It is too warm and too frightening to sleep, so I stalk the corridors through the wadeable dark, certain the shadows have eyes.

I pause outside Rose's room, as if her mere proximity can cast some kind of calming spell. I hear her shuddering awake, gasping, murmuring to herself.

"I am not afraid. Not afraid!"

Not afraid of what, Rose?

I press myself to the door, and wonder if I should announce my presence. But I recall the last time I did, and think the better of it.

I am here, Rose, I whisper inwardly. When you are ready to share your fears, I will be here.



A few days later, I go for a walk in the gardens and decide to climb one of the trees there. I leap into the lowest branches and swing upwards, finding myself a sturdy position in which to survey the quiet gleam of the land. The clouds are teaming with silver and gold, an ocean of sky over a land that sings with colour.

A moment of pleasure I am unprepared for slips through me. *This is mine, and I'm the land's.*

It is not a bad place to belong.

Rose drifts down through the lawns, humming something to herself. She does not notice me, but she stops to rest beside the trunk. She half-sings Mother's lullaby, trying to summon the lyrics.

"That's a lovely tune," I remark, after waiting perhaps too long.

Rose startles, glancing up. I drop down in a single bound.

"Sorry," I say. "I was up there when you came and I wasn't sure whether to stay, or say something, and now I feel... mildly awkward."

Rose laughs. "It's fine. I'm trying to figure out the words, I can't quite pin them down."

I throw back my head and burst into song. It is good to sing the words aloud again, to have an audience. *"Home is here in the realm of dreams, home is here in your arms. The realm of the fairies is your home my dear; here I'll shelter you from harm."*

“You know it!” Rose’s face lights up. “I thought it was a family thing. Mama used to sing it to us, but no one else in the village knew it.”

“I think your mother was part fey.”

“Be serious.”

“I am. When this place fell, many fairies escaped into the world. I imagine they disguised themselves as humans, and lived ordinary lives, only telling our tales to their offspring.”

It would explain how Rose knows the song, at least in part. Why she had heard the story of the dark fairy before. She is silent for a moment, processing this.

I touch her arm. “Rose?”

“Sorry,” she laughs, shaking her thoughts away. “You might be right, you know. Do you remember the rest of the song?”

I sing the next line. *“Here you are safe and here you are loved, and here I will stay for all time. I’ll always be here, my darling, my dear, in the stars, the sea and the shine.”*

Rose sits for a moment, rapt in apparent awe.

The song reminds her of her mother; I remind myself. It has nothing to do with you.

“You have a nice voice,” she says dreamily.

I am glad she cannot see my blush. “Thank you.”

She did not say anything when I sang at her birthday party. She definitely didn’t cast any dreamy looks at me. What’s changed?

A soft breeze sways through the tree. Rose looks up into the branches, her gaze fixed high above us.

“I have never been able to climb trees well,” she admits. “Freedom pushed me out of a tree once, and even though he apologised and offered to teach me later, I didn’t trust him enough to get up in the branches again.”

I’m half mad at him for doing something like that, and half intrigued once more about this strange relationship she has with him. I wonder why she’s telling me this, what response she wants. “Do you... do you want me to teach you?”

Rose smiles. “Yes.”

“I... I’m not sure I can. I mean... I am so much... larger than you, and...”

“Stronger?”

“Yes.”

I brace myself for the sharp comment, the rebuttal. ‘I’m stronger than I look!’ ‘Anything you can climb, I can climb higher!’ ‘How dare you suggest I’m weak?’ but nothing like that comes.

“Will you try?”

“Of course, if that is what you wish.”

Rose beams, hitching up her skirts and tying them under her apron, exposing a great deal of her legs. I whirl my gaze upwards in an attempt to look somewhere—anywhere—else. Is she honestly so oblivious to the effect she has on me? Or have I become something so familial she doesn’t need to think about it?

She wouldn’t think anything of showing so much leg to Freedom.

But she doesn’t trust him, either.

The first branch is far above Rose’s reach, so I wrap my arms around her waist and lift her up to grab it, swinging up afterwards before my palms can think too much about where they were. I gesture to another branch.

“Put your hand on that one,” I instruct. “And your foot there. If you grab that branch with your other hand... can you pull yourself up?”

Rose does as I suggest, but struggles with pulling herself up. She even looks *nervous*. It's been a long time since we went ice-skating. I had forgotten she could be rattled. It would be easy to lift her up, but I know that getting to the top isn't the goal. *Climbing* is. She needs to do this herself.

"You can manage," I whisper in her ear, "keep going."

I hover behind her, inches away, ready to catch her if she falls, support her if she needs it. But my words seem to be all she needs. Her resolve strengthens, and after a few failed attempts, she finally pulls herself onto the next branch.

She looks back at me, grinning, as if waiting for me to follow.

Anywhere, Rose. Everywhere.

We climb to the top together, and Rose gasps, as if she hasn't seen a view even more magnificent from the top of the castle.

"It's magnificent."

So are you.

"I feel like I'm the queen of the kingdom."

You could be my queen.

"How do you not want to stay up here forever?"

I would, with you.

"It gets uncomfortable after a while," I tell her instead. "Plus, I didn't bring a book."

Rose laughs. "Perhaps we could make our own tale. Once upon a time there was a young girl called... Lily, who led a very boring and mundane life. One day she met a boy called, um, Reed, and after that point even the boring things were better. The end."

It is very hard to suppress my grin. "The story lacks conflict."

"It's internal," she says, shrugging. She half-loses her balance, grabbing hold of a branch before I can steady her. I sense the lesson is over, leaping down in a single bound before turning back to her, unsure of the assistance she requires.

Rose, seeing me waiting, drops from the top and launches herself into my arms. It comes as such a shock that I barely have time to catch her, losing my footing and rolling into the grass, Rose tight against my chest. She laughs, moving towards my face.

"Sorry," she says.

I pluck a bit of grass from her hair. "A little warning, next time? My catching skills are usually much more impressive."

"I remember."

I want to put my arms around her and tuck her under my chin, to lie with her against me all afternoon. I think about catching her when she fell off the dresser, how she flinched, squirmed away from me. Now she squirms *into* me.

That's a good sign, right?

I think about telling her I love her. Just letting it slip out, like a breath. Just to see what she will do. But the memory of her flinching comes back.

If I tell her, and she does not return my affections, it will kill me.

The blue skies are thick with golden light. It is not a bad day to die. In her arms is not a bad way to die.

But I say nothing. A moment later, she scrambles upright, takes my hands, and we spend the rest of the afternoon in the music room, singing together.

Rose spends the next few days largely locked away in the Hall of Mirrors. I try not to intrude, but occasionally I catch glimpses of what she's looking at. I expect her to be checking in on her family, but more often she is asking questions of the castle. She does not discover much. Moya won't let her. And perhaps Mother won't either, if she's still here, too afraid of us losing our last chance.

I go to speak to Mother's portrait.

"I'm sure you're already painfully aware of this by now," I tell it, "but I am in love with her. In case you didn't know already." I pause. "Any advice?"

Only silence follows.

"That's what I thought."

I awake the next morning before dawn, feeling almost feverish. It's too hot to sleep on the pile of furs, and I've moved back onto the bed. It seems more normal than it used to, but I'm still not sleeping well. Both dreams and nightmares torment me with visions of things that might be.

I wander into the hallway, conscious of something far-off disturbing the silence. The door to the Hall of Mirrors is open. I hear Grace's voice.

Odd.

I drift towards it. Rose is crouched on the floor before the Mirror of Memories.

"Rose? What are you doing up at this hour? Who are you..." My eyes sail over her to the image within the frame. Grace, in the gardens, an old memory of mine. She's trying to snip the flowers and I'm holding the secateurs out of reach. "Grace!"

Rose stares at me, her silence sharp. "You knew her."

"Of course I knew her. She was one of the few I could have called a friend. Why are you—"

"Because she's my mother!" Rose rushes, her voice pulsing with disbelief. "You didn't know?"

"She's your... your mother?" It seems impossible, because even though I know time runs differently, Grace only left three years ago. It is not possible for her to be anyone's mother.

I'm going to marry Henry and have at least one daughter.

"No, no I didn't know—"

"How is this even possible?" Rose is still staring at me. I wonder if she suspects this is another lie. "She died eight years ago and you're... you're not secretly really old, are you?"

"What? No, no. She was here only three years ago. I knew time ran differently, but it just never occurred to me..." I check Rose's face against Grace's. They have the same smile, similar glittering eyes. "I should have known," I whisper, but not for their similarities.

"We don't look alike."

"No, it's not that. It's more to do with how you look at me."

I wonder if Grace ever mentioned me in some way, in the stories she told to her children. I wonder if that is why Rose has never been afraid of me, not even at the start.

Thank you, I say to her, or perhaps whatever powers brought them both into my life in the first place.

"What was she like?" Rose asks me. "No one alive has fresher memories of her than you do."

"She was... kind." The word hardly does her justice. "A thoroughly beautiful soul. She was patient and sweet. It's a shame you don't take after her."

Rose elbows me in the side.

I wonder if I should tell her Grace has been visiting me in my dreams, if that would bring her solace or pain. I'm not sure I'd want to know my mother was talking to someone else.

And she might not be real.

I decided against it, for now, telling her about the day Grace came to the castle instead. "She screamed, when she first saw me," I continue, "but it was a flustered sort of scream, as if she were trying to control it, knew that it was impolite to say anything. Then she ran into the next room, shutting the door behind her and blabbering. 'I'm so terribly sorry... terribly sorry. Just... just give me a minute, please! I really must apologise...' Her tone and her words were so unusual, that I began to laugh. Then she slowly crept out of the room, giggling nervously. By the end of the week she was calling me her dear friend."

Rose smiles "That sounds like Mama."

We share a look, not one we've had before. I don't know entirely what it means, but it is born out of this shared person we both knew, and loved.

"What do you remember of your mother?" she asks.

Her question catches me off-guard. I blink at her momentarily.

"You knew my mother," she explains. "I should like to know a little more about yours."

"I remember very... very little. She was kind. Selfless. A fierce protector. I remember... I remember how she made me feel, even though I cannot remember her touch. I remember... I know... that she loved me."

Rose swallows. "There's nothing greater than that, is there?"

"No, I suppose not."

"And nothing worse."

I sense she has slipped into a painful reverie. "Come," I say, taking her hand. "I have something else to show you."

I take her to a small gallery room in one of the towers. Faint dawn light is already spilling into it. It houses nothing but the six portraits of the women who have come before her, their images magically captured for all eternity, stamped into the history of my curse. I point to the one of Grace, fresh and dewy as a rosebud. The same age as her daughter.

"This appeared the day she left," I explain. "The last truly magical thing to happen, before your arrival. The castle started to decline not long after."

Her eyes turn to the rest of the portraits.

"The others," I explain. "The visitors before you."

She takes a moment to examine them now, side by side, reading the names printed beside each one. There is a blank frame in the room. A seventh. Hers. I sigh.

"It arrived a few days ago," I say, the wooden back glaring at me.

Rose seems to feel its gaze too.

"I'm tired," she says. "I think I'm going back to bed."

"Shall I escort you?"

She nods, tucking her arm into mine, and says very little as I walk her back to her room.

She says very little for the rest of the day. No questions about her mother, so I shoulder any of my own. No questions about anything. She isn't angry. She seems... sad.

I finally question her about it after dinner. "Something is bothering you," I tell her. "And I should like to hear it."

"It's silly—"

"Rose," I say gently, "tell me."

Her resolve melts away, her hands fidget manically. "The... the other visitors. Did they... did they share the same room as me?"

I blink, not expecting this. "Grace did," I say. "Chose it, actually."

She smiles at this. "I don't... I don't like the idea of just being a visitor in this place, of just being a part of its history."

You are not, I want to tell her. *This is your home, if you'll have it. You are no visitor, no footnote in history. You are the beginning and end of my story.*

"I know this is going to sound ridiculous..." she continues, "it's so silly and selfish, but... if at all possible, do you... do you think you could give your next visitors different rooms, please?"

I wait for her to elaborate, to explain, but it does not come.

"Never mind," she says, taking my silence for refusal. "It's a trivial thing. Forget it."

"I'll happily comply," I tell her, half-forgetting that there will be no next visitor. "Heaven knows there's rooms enough, but... I hope you will tell me why. Why it matters to you."

Rose's fingers twist to uncomfortable proportions. She turns away from me, towards the door, as if she'd rather flee than confess.

"I don't... I don't want to become just one of the others," she whispers. "I don't... I don't want to be forgotten."

Every time a guest has left this place, I have feared being forgotten. Of losing all meaning to them. I want to be remembered, to be important to someone, anyone... but I have never, ever heard this fear from my guests before.

As if I could ever forget Rose. I could live a hundred years and she would be the very last thought I ever had.

I want to reach out and touch her shoulder, or, better yet, wrap her in my arms completely, but I lack the courage. I am afraid she will know what I feel if I get any closer to her.

"There's no chance of that," I tell her.

There is a little pause before she turns, and says brightly, "Right! Of course not. I mean, you remember everyone, I'm certain."

I swallow. "I do," I reply. "But... I will remember none quite like I remember you."

Rose's mouth twitches into a worried smile. "What... what does that mean?"

I can no longer hold back. I reach out to her and brush her hair over her shoulder, letting my hand rest on her arm for a little too long. "You are my favourite," I say. "I fear that you may always be."

At this, Rose is the one who swallows. Have I made her uncomfortable, or revealed too much? I yank my hand back, but Rose goes to grab it.

"I think you might be my favourite, too," she admits. There is something in her face, her expression, that I have not witnessed before. And not just from her, from anyone. She looks happy and fearful and... and something else I have no name for.

I am completely unprepared when she leans up on tip-toe, pulls my face down, and kisses me lightly on the cheek.

"I'm going to bed now," she says simply, as if what she has done is a perfectly normal, casual thing. She smiles cheerfully. "Goodnight."

Her kiss, once more, stays with me.



I'm her favourite.

Her favourite what, exactly? It's not like she lives in an enchanted castle and has only ever entertained a grand total of seven people. She has met dozens, maybe hundreds of people. Was she honestly trying to say I am her favourite out of all of those?

I must be misunderstanding, or reading too much into her meaning. She has expressed familial sentiment towards me before. Maybe she means I'm her favourite family-like member. Her favourite brother-substitute.

That must be it. Surely.

But then... that look. The first real wavering of her fearlessness. Why was she scared to tell me, if it meant so little?

My chest tightens uncomfortably, but at the same time, there is a flickering within me, a surge of something I have never dared to feel before.

Hope, blossoming inside.

I dare to grasp it.



Grace visits me that night. I find her watching Rose reading in the bedroom that was once her own, the short time she was here.

"You're her mother."

Grace smiles, not taking her eyes off her daughter. "Took you long enough."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I wanted you to know her as her, and not as my daughter. I thought it might make things a little strange."

"It's always a little strange, with Rose."

Grace half snorts, half sighs. "Isn't it just?"

"She's magnificent, Grace. You must be so proud."

She drops her gaze away. "Maybe one day."

"Why wouldn't you—"

"Oh, it's not her," Grace assures me. "Nothing she's done. Something I did to her."

"What did you—"

"I died," she replies coolly. "And Rose... Rose saw more than she should that night, I fear. And after..." She shakes her head. "Not my memory to share, but my burden to carry."

I swallow. "Grace," I ask carefully, "what is Rose so afraid of?"

Her face is tight with pain. "Of becoming like her father," she explains, "of suffering how she perceives him to be suffering."

"I don't... I don't quite understand."

"Neither, I think, does she." She sighs. "I told her a bedtime story about you, you know. So long ago. I don't think she even remembers."

"Oh?" My curiosity is piqued. "What did you say?"

"I told my eldest three about an enchanted castle guarded by a man that looked like a monster, trapped there by a dark fairy, waiting for someone to free him. Honour cried in sympathy. Rose hugged her toy sword and said that she would save him."

"That sounds like Rose."

Grace smiles.

"What did Freedom say?"

“Ah,” Grace looks about awkwardly, “that maybe we should slay the man-monster, just to be safe.”

“Ouch.”

“Yes, be careful of that boy. I do worry about him sometimes.”

“Noted.”

She looks back to Rose. “I always thought you and she would make a good match. Something in her spirit reminded me of you, even when she was a child. I couldn’t put my finger on why, whether it was the way she’d lose herself in a book like you, or babble about it in childish glee, or the way she’d look at the land beyond the stream. It’s like she was born with her heart and mind elsewhere, and nothing but adventure in the great wide somewhere would ever help her find it.”

She cannot know how much this thought warms me, this idea. That perhaps no one else ever *could* have rescued me, because Rose was yet to exist.

Grace touches my cheek. Her fingers are like ice. “She has a knack for seeing the beauty in things,” she says. “Even more readily than me.”

We turn to face the reading girl, admiring her for a moment in silence.

“Do you... do you ever talk to Rose?” I ask her.

“Yes,” Grace says softly. “But not in a way she hears.”

Chapter Sixteen



Ariel

When the next full moon comes, Rose walks down to the crypt with me, her arm tucked into mine. Bramble comes too, warily, as if sensing that something is amiss, that I am less myself than usual.

The journey is wordless. I wonder if she is afraid. I am. I do not want her to see me as a monster, but then she already has, and still adamantly refuses to accept it. That scares me too, but for a different reason.

As I slip into the cell and close the door, I tell her she does not have to stay.

"I want to," she responds, her words firm. "At least until you're not... you anymore."

"It won't be pleasant to watch."

"I can't imagine it's pleasant to go through."

It isn't. "I'll need to change."

"No peeking, I promise."

She turns around to give me some privacy, and I strip everything away. Margaret hates it when I waste clothes. I slide them through the bars as I always do, but this time, there is someone to take them from me. She folds them up, very carefully. I am not sure what this gesture means, or if she only does it to give herself

something to do, but I am grateful for it.

“Who used to let you out?” she asks, back still turned.

“Myself. Apparently, I don’t know how to use keys when I’m in that state.”

I estimate we have around ten minutes until sunset. I am not sure how to pass the time, but I come and sit on the other side of the door, pressing my back to the bars. I am not sure if I imagine it, but I think her body relaxes against mine. She is so free with me, so unapologetically easy. I have never been so comfortable with anyone else, and never so afraid.

“You can still—”

“I’m staying.” She wriggles her hand through the bars and finds my arm. She squeezes it. The pressure ignites a fire in me. Nobody else’s touch ever did this, either. “You won’t be alone tonight. Unless... unless you really want me to go?”

I do not want her to go. I never want her to go. I want her to be by my side, always her, always unafraid. “No,” I tell her, trying to press the weight of my desire into my voice. “I don’t want you to go.”

We sit in silence for a few minutes more. She strokes my arm. It is a tender, gentle thing. Not like how she strokes Bramble. There is a lot wound up in this motion, or so I hope.

I feel the familiar ripple through my body. I tense under her arm. Bramble starts to growl. Try as I might to contain it, a slight moan escapes. I do not want to show her my pain. I do not want to inflict that on her. “Rose...” I croak, “it’s starting.”

She turns around to face me. I can only see a glimpse of her through my crushed eyes, but she is here, she is with me. I press against the bars, trying to push the pain into the iron, and her face meets mine. She grabs my fists, but I yank them away.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Less concern about me, please, more concern about you.”

Her voice is like water on a burn. For a moment, the pain subsides.

“You are a far more pleasing topic.” I wish I could smile.

“A joke. A joke is good.”

“It wasn’t... a joke...”

“I know.” She grabs my hand again, and this time, I let her. I squeeze back, just a bit. It’s all I can manage, all I trust myself with. My whole body burns, my muscles strain and stretch, as if transforming. My head pounds. I cannot contain it.

I feel a small, cool presence on my cheek. Rose is touching me. “You’re going to be fine,” she whispers.

I want to believe her, but I am too far gone. “I don’t... I don’t feel fine.”

“That’s all right,” she replies, her voice as soft as her touch. “You don’t have to feel fine all the time. I don’t.”

I need a distraction, anything to endure the next few moments, and the beautiful pain of her company. “Tell me... tell me something about yourself that I don’t know.”

This seems to catch her off guard. “Oh, um. My favourite colour is blue—”

“Something serious.”

“I love the colour of your eyes.”

For a second, I am pulled away from the pain. What did she just say?

“Not... a good time... to tease...” I breathe.

“I really wish you’d believe me when I try to compliment you.” She swallows.

“That’s another thing you don’t know.”

I shake, vibrating, trembling so hard it is difficult to keep awake, to stay. *Focus on her*, I tell myself. *She will be your anchor. Hold onto her if you want to hold on to yourself.*

"I used to joke that you were hideous," she rushes. "I was serious, at the time. But now I see you, now that I *see* you... I just wish that you could see yourself as I do."

I almost want to laugh, but I don't. I believe her. I believe in her beautiful words. "Even... like... this?"

"In all ways, in all lights, in all things."

I believe what she believes. I almost believe that her words will rescue me from this night. If I can keep looking at her, keep her with me, I will not change.

"Rose," I cry out.

"I'm here."

"Thank you."

Her beautiful, shimmering face is the last thing I see. I take her words, and her affection, with me.



When I wake in the morning, it is not so awful a place. My limbs are heavy, my head still burns, but shafts of sunlight are drifting into the cell, and Rose is with me. Her presence is warmer, and more real, than the sun. She is sitting by my side, drinking tea, I believe, and she has covered me with a blanket. It could be the fairies, of course, but somehow I know it's come from her.

I open my eyes and my mouth. I try to ask her if she's all right, but she cuts across me.

"How are you?"

Her intention, for once, is quite clear. Her concern is greater than mine. She is trying to tell me that I matter more than she does, at least in this moment. The idea warms me.

"I have been better," I say honestly, rubbing my head. "But I've been worse."

"You didn't howl last night, I don't think."

"No, I didn't... I didn't feel as angry, last night, as I usually do."

This much is true. I have memories of pacing, of frustration, but no anger. No desire to escape. I do not seem to have hurt myself either.

Rose looks a little pale. "Tea?" she offers. "It's cooled down, now. I didn't drink all of it, promise."

I accept her cup, drinking carefully. This is the first time we've ever shared a drink, the first time my lips have touched anything that hers have. She does not seem to realise the intimacy of this action, but the thought burns through me. She leans against me as I sip away. Does she have any idea what her closeness does to me? My heart swells in my chest. I am going to dissolve into ashes.

"It wasn't... it wasn't too horrible for you?" I ask, desperate to know.

"No," her voice sounds honest, although it is not always easy to tell with Rose. "I think it would have been worse for me, not to see, and to stay up there and wonder."

I nod. It is about all I can manage, for the moment. She cares about me. She worries about me. She wants to be with me. Maybe not to the extent that I do, but maybe, one day, soon...

"Thank you," I tell her. "For being there. It... it helped."

"I'm glad. I... I can stay next time, then?"

For a moment, I fall quiet. Next time falls a few days before the solstice.

"Next time... will be the last time."

"Yes."

Her expression is impossible to read. I have a month, a month to make her fall in love with me, before she vanishes forever, before my heart breaks. Before I die.

I am in love with you, I want to say. Irreversibly. I could live the full weight of the years given to me without this curse, and never love another.

I could meet every soul in the world, but she would still be in only one in the world I clung to. Hers is fire and light and life. Every other is paper in comparison. Flimsy. Burnable. Erasable. Escapable.

Rose pulls me gently into her arms, as if she half knows what I am thinking. There's a flash of something sad in her expression too, but I hardly dare pluck at it. I wrap my arms around her middle and let her hold me, wishing it was enough, that this affection alone could save me.

For a moment, I let myself forget that she is far more likely to destroy me.



Rose helps me back into the castle and into my own bed, even though I tell her I feel "almost perfectly all right." She shakes her head and pulls the covers up around me, telling me she feels tired too. I wonder how true that is.

Either way, she doesn't go to bed. She spends most of the day in the Hall of Mirrors, coming to check on me every so often like an overbearing nursemaid. It is hard to mind, and hard not to miss her when she disappears again.

I love not having to hide from her. What an idiot I was, not to share this with her almost immediately. How easier life is when I don't have to pretend. How could I ever have thought she'd have hated me?

"Rose?" I ask, as she checks on me just before retiring for the night.

"Yes?"

What did I mean to say? Sorry? I love you? Stay with me, just a little longer?

"Thank you."

She crosses the room again, kissing my forehead. "You don't need to thank me for caring for you. You'd do the same for me."

Beautiful, torturous goddess. *But how much do you care?*

She slips away from me, her presence lingering in the air between us.

I fall into a sleep, lighter and easier than usual.



Not long after Penelope left, the magic in the castle started to wane. The fairies tried to hide it from me for a while, but I was sixteen by that point. I knew something was wrong.

"Don't worry about it, little prince," Margaret said, patting my hand as if I were a child and didn't tower over her by this point. "We'll find a way. We always do."

Ariel suggested one of them cross over the gateway during the next solstice, try and find other fairies that might help.

"And if you couldn't find your way back again?"

"Thorn can open the gateway."

My ears pricked up. "Wait, I can?"

“No. No. He may be a prince, but he is half-mortal and untrained. The consequences— No. No. We’ll find another way.”

They cut me out of any further conversation, only including me when a decision had been reached. Margaret would “reduce her form” siphoning her magic into the castle, in a similar way that mother had once done.

“No!” I cried. “No, I forbid it!”

“Calm down, little prince. It won’t be quite like that. I’ll still be here. You can still converse with me. I just won’t have a body for a while.”

“How... how long is a while?”

She stiffened. “Until the curse is broken.”

“And if it isn’t?”

Gazes hit the floor, silence splitting through the room.

“No. *No!* You’ll... you could... you’ll disappear like Mother. You’ll *die*.”

“It is the best chance we have of—”

“I don’t care about breaking the curse! I care about *you*.”

Margaret smiled, reached out a hand to touch my face. I felt very small again, under her warm fingers. “And I care about you. More than you can understand, right now. We were never going to leave you. We never *will*. Either way, we’ll die eventually. This way offers hope.”

“And we’ll still be here,” Ophelia added, flying up to kiss my cheek.

Margaret folded me into her arms. “You have to release me,” she said. “You have to let me go.”

I hugged her back fiercely. “I don’t want to.”

“Love means letting go,” she said. “Please, my beautiful boy.”

I swallowed, the ache deep in my chest. “Do what needs to be done,” I whispered.

“I always have.”



It was strange having Margaret there and not there. Talking but not eating, fussing but not hugging. I missed her hugs. She was the best at them, so strong I rarely worried that I would break her.

Magic fizzled back, for a while. A few more years passed before it waned again.

Then it was Ophelia’s turn.

I was older then. I didn’t cry as much. As least, not in front of them. I told myself I couldn’t miss her if she was still there.

I did, though. It was like she had gone somewhere and left her voice behind.

Ariel was still there through it all, thick and thin, through every visitor, every harsh word, every transformation.

Until Grace left, and the gardens started to die. When the next solstice came, the gateway could barely open.

“I think, maybe—”

“No,” I said, cutting her off, “don’t even think about—”

“You can’t order me not to think,” she snapped. “But all right.”

A few months later, it was dust and ash, and Margaret and Ophelia’s voices were growing fainter and quieter.

The next solstice, the way didn’t open at all.

The morning after, I couldn’t find Ariel anywhere. I panicked, thinking she’d gone already, remembering that I’d never expressly forbidden her from leaving. I

fled around the castle in a frenzy, before spotting her in the meadow beside the fog.

I rushed to her side. "I thought... I thought you'd..."

"What?" she said, flashing a smile, "Without saying goodbye?"

My stomach plummeted, because I knew what she had to do, and that I had no choice.

"I don't want you to go."

"Well, I'm not going anywhere."

"It... it won't be the same."

"No." She sighed. "No, I know it won't be."

"It's... it's not fair. It's not fair that you have to do this." *It's not fair that I have to be alone.*

Ariel squeezed my shoulder. "Did I ever tell you that I once spent twelve years imprisoned in a tree?"

"Not... not sure I see the relevance?"

"Well, it was a beastly place to be trapped. And then the ass that freed me made me work for him for years. Not a fun time in my life."

"I don't understand?"

"There are worse places to be trapped than here," she explained. "And worse people to serve."

"You are not my servant."

"No, I'm not. So I'm not doing this out of loyalty. So don't waste time feeling bad, all right?"

"I... I wish there was another way."

Ariel pulled me into her arms, holding me against her shoulder. I wondered how long it would be before another person held me like this, or if anyone ever would. "This isn't forever," she said. "Not forever at all."

But it wasn't enough. I had a few months more with her, a few more months of chatting beside the fire, and then she too grew quiet, and their forms grew dimmer, until finally, finally I was alone once more.



At some point in the night, an urgent rapping wakes me. Rose's voice sounds on the other side of the door, low but rushed.

"Thorn! *Thorn!* Wake up!"

I stumble out of bed, opening the door. She almost falls into me. "What is it?"

"I was... I was in the Hall of Mirrors and..."

I freeze, thinking of Moya's covered prison, wondering if Rose unveiled it like I once did.

"What did you—"

"In the Mirror of Truth, there was a fairy, she said her name was Ariel—"

The Mirror of Truth. It shows you for what you really are. Why hadn't I thought of trying that before?

Ariel.

"Is she still—"

"I'm not sure, but I knew you'd want to see—"

I barge past her, racing to the Hall, turning towards the glass, heart rising in my chest—

But there is no one there. I stand back before it can reveal myself to me, suppressing a sigh.

Rose appears beside me.

“Did... did she say anything to you?” I ask.

“Um, quite a bit. Pretty much everything you told me. I’m key to breaking the curse, dark fairy out to get me, etcetera.”

Her eyes avoid me, and I wonder if that’s all they spoke about. Ariel is rarely so cryptic. I doubt she would have revealed everything, knowing what had happened in the past, but there’s no telling what else she might have said.

Dammit, Ariel. Come back.

Rose tugs on my sleeve. “Let’s sit for a bit, in case she returns.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I don’t think I would want to wait by myself,” she says, then shakes her head. “Actually, that’s not entirely true. *I* probably would want to be by myself, all my hopes and fears locked away, but... but you don’t want to be alone, do you?”

“I... no.”

“And I don’t want you to be alone, so I will stay with you.”

I love and hate that she knows this about me, that she’s capable of realising that I might want something different than her, that she’s offering comfort she might reject for herself. I hate that I cannot offer her the same, that she still hides her pain from me. I hate that I love her more than ever, that I know her more and less.

You don’t have to thank me for caring about you.

We sit together on the floor, Rose’s head pressed against my shoulder. “Do you want to watch something?” she asks.

I shake my head. “What do you want, Rose?”

“Right now?”

Right now. Tomorrow. For the rest of your life. Tell me the deepest crevices of your heart. “Now is fine.”

“Genuinely?” She looks embarrassed. “I just want you to be happy. I don’t want you to be alone.”

Her words touch my heart, burning somewhere between pleasure and pain. I think about telling her so many things.

“I am happy,” I tell her, “I am with you.”

Rose’s expression saddens. It reads *you won’t always be*. I am glad she doesn’t speak them. I don’t need the reminder.

She blinks, trying to put on a smile. “I thought we agreed no more lying?”

“That wasn’t a lie.”

“You miss your friends,” she says. “You don’t have to pretend to be happy when you’re missing someone.”

“You do.”

Rose bristles. “That’s different.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m always missing someone.”

A sharp burst of pain strikes me in the chest. Grace. She still misses her, all the time. Endlessly. And now she has the rest of her family heaped on top of all that grief.

I always assumed that if I knew my own mother was gone for good, that pain would be more manageable somehow, I would no longer be hanging on the precipice of that grief. I could have fallen and climbed back to my feet long ago. But Rose fell into that void eight years past, and although she crawled out of it, she left something behind in the dark.

I don’t think she wants words. She probably already regrets the ones she’s spoken, the tiny chink of the iceberg she’s cast in my direction.

I say nothing, and wrap my arm around her instead.



It becomes so blisteringly hot over the next few days that I debate abandoning clothes altogether, or temporarily moving into the lake during the daylight hours. Rose, noticing that I've become so hot I'm panting almost as much as Bramble, asks if I'm all right.

"I'm not very good with the heat," I admit.

Her eyes widen. "Oh, oh, I didn't think—"

"It's all right."

"It must be sweltering—"

"It certainly isn't pleasant."

"You don't... you don't have to wear clothes, for my sake, you know," she says.

My tail twitches with the thought of being naked in her company, never mind that my fur hides almost everything. It would not hide enough. "Oh, but I really do." *And I'd do a lot more, for your sake.*

Rose looks thoughtful for a moment. "I can trim your fur for you, if you like. I mean, it might not be pretty—"

"Never really something I've been concerned with."

She giggles, and I wish I had some way of bottling the sound.

"The fairies used to trim it for me. I... I don't mind you doing it, instead."

I am unprepared for the intimacy of this idea when Rose finds a pair of shears and instructs me to remove my shirt. "Have you done this before?"

"Sheared a sentient beast? Oddly no."

I laugh. The blades start to snip away. It is a relief to feel something like a breeze against my back, but it might just be Rose's fingers. I feel self-conscious again. I told her I didn't mind if it was pretty, but there's a vain part of me that wants it vaguely symmetrical, even if she's the only person here to laugh at me.

The back, arms and legs are easy enough, but the face is another matter. Sitting, I am level with her chest, and her face is far too close to mine when she snips and shaves at my cheeks. Her nearness is unbearable. She bites her lip in concentration.

I feel like the man in me will burst out of his skin before she can release me. I want to kiss her so badly I ache.

"Are you all right?" she frowns. "You're trembling."

"It's the heat."

"Your tail is twitching."

Traitorous tail.

I know I promised no more lies, but I'm not sure I can tell her how utterly she undoes me.

"Are you worried I'll make you look silly?"

"A little," I concur.

She smiles. "You'll be as handsome as ever," she declares, with no trace of irony. "And I'm almost done."

She finishes up and directs me to a mirror. It's a decent job.

"You barely touched my mane."

Rose grins, tugging my ear as she hands me my shirt. "That's because I like your mane. Are you all right to clean up?"



The following day, she hands me a neatly folded parcel, wrapped lightly in paper. I pull the string, already sensing from the weight what must be under it.

Clothes. A lightweight shirt, a pair of linen trousers. She has not found these, she has made them herself, stitched them carefully into the night.

For a moment, I am rendered speechless.

“Rose...”

“Do you like them?”

“Yes. Very much.”

“I hope they fit. I will confess I had to do a little bit of thieving for the pattern —”

“I’ll try them on.”

I disappear behind a screen and tear off my existing trappings. I do not know where she found the fabric, but it is perfectly selected. Light, but not delicate. My claws do not tear it, and she hasn’t included anything fiddly like buttons or hooks. Simple drawstrings.

I emerge from behind the screen, and for a minute, I think Rose is unhappy with the finished project. She stares at me, her mouth partly open, not speaking. Then her face breaks into a smile, and she comes towards me, a slight bounce in her step.

“Better?”

“Much.”

She places her hands against my chest, pulling the strings a little closer, fiddling with them for a moment. I love this, this closeness, this ease. But it’s difficult too, being so near to her. When her fingers skim against her thorn pendant, and her eyes glisten, I want so terribly to close my whole body around her and lift her into my arms, into me, fully. Bury my face in hers. Close the gaps between us.

“I’m glad they fit,” she says.

“Me too. I would hate not to be able to wear anything you gave me.”

Rose smirks. “Next time I’ll make you something hideous. Bright. Patterned. Ruffly.”

“I’d still wear it.”

“No, you wouldn’t.”

“I would. Well, maybe not where anyone else could see me...”

She laughs. “You look... good.”

“It’s the clothes.”

“No,” she says quietly, “it’s not them.” She shakes her head, as if she can erase the words she’s just spoken, and I won’t obsess about them all night. “Lunch?” she says brightly instead.

There is nothing to do but nod.



I get a chance to repay the fraction of kindness she has bestowed on me when, a few days later, the sudden burst of intense, summery heat nearly burns her to a crisp. I fetch buckets of water from the fountain for her to bathe in and ask the fairies—still more or less invisible to me—to fetch her some ointment to soothe her

skin.

She is so flustered when she starts to flake that I almost want to laugh. I've never known her to be so concerned with her appearance before.

"You're enjoying this," she spits.

"I enjoy nothing that causes you pain," I return. "But I do enjoy being the attractive one, for a change."

A wry smile tugs the corners of her lips. "Attractive, am I?"

"Well, compared to some." It seems impossible that she doesn't know how beautiful she is, or how beautiful *I* think she is. I must have mentioned it before. Her face seems to suggest otherwise. "You are very attractive, Rose, and well you know it."

The ghost of a blush rises in her cheeks, more likely to be the heat, I'm sure.

The heat rises to something like an inferno, making sleep almost impossible. We stay up as long as we dare, waiting for it to turn cool, but the scorching sun has seared the stone, infecting the rooms with its sticky, wadeable heat. I toss and turn all night, my nightmares of Moya replaced by a longing for Rose which grows like a sickness, worsened by visions of her leaving.

We are running out of time.

One night, we sit together on the rooftop garden. It is a breathtaking evening, illuminated by soft, shimmering candlelight. We are both trying to read, but neither of us are succeeding. It is too beautiful tonight to do anything but breathe and stare.

"Rose..." I begin. "Are you happy here?"

I asked her this question once before, and did not get the answer I wanted.

This time, there is no pause. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Her words give me the merest flash of courage. "I know it is impossible for you to return the sentiment," I continue, "but... I'm very glad you came here."

Rose smiles. "The experience has not been as awful as I first thought it would be." She plays with the tassels on her shawl. "And... I'm very glad to have met you, too. I can't imagine ever not."

Before I can unravel her words, Rose jumps from her cushion and throws her arms around me, burying her face in my neck, her fingers tight in my clothes. She's holding me with an urgency I am not used to. There is nothing soft or gentle in her hold. It's fierce, almost desperate.

Slowly, she inches back and places her head in my lap. A few precious moments tick by in harmonious silence. She looks ready to sleep.

"Thorn?" she whispers.

"Yes, Rose?"

"I do desperately want to see my family again, but... I'm not exactly looking forward to saying goodbye."

Then don't say goodbye. Say you love me. If you do, you can have everything. If you do...

If you do.

If.

Because I'm not sure she *does* have to say it. She might just need to feel it. And if I'm still not human... she doesn't.

I stroke a lock of hair away from her face, trying not to sound sad.

"I'll miss you until the moment I die," I tell her.

She is half-asleep, murmuring something underneath me. I escort her back to her room, wondering if I should scoop her up. I decide against it, knowing how hard it will be to let her go.

She's a little more awake by the time we reach her room. I hover at the door.

How to say *I love you* without saying *I love you*? How to let her know softly, giving her enough time so that she doesn't reject me outright?

"Rose."

"Yes?"

"I know... I know my interaction with other people has been... limited, somewhat. But, I wish you to know that, of all the people I have ever met..."

"Yes?"

"I could meet every soul in the world, and you would still be my favourite."

This is different from before, when I told her she was my favourite out of the seven. This is out of everyone. This is, *I love you, Rose. Please know it.*

But she says nothing, kissing my hands instead, and slips away to her room.

Chapter Seventeen



Lightning

I have to tell her, don't I? I have to tell her outright and just... just hope for the best.

I am not only now terrified of dying. There have been times I have almost longed for it. But I am not keen to face death. I do not want to leave her side.

Even if she doesn't love me, she clearly cares for me. If I die—and if she discovers she is inadvertently the cause of it—she is going to be upset. I cannot take joy from that. I do not want to see her hurt.

So I'll wait until almost the last moment. If the gateway is open, she'll be able to leave and not look back. I don't think I'll expire immediately. She doesn't have to know, doesn't have to bear that pain.

My heart trembles, and I feel sick at the thought.

I do not want to die alone.

You might not die, says the voice of reason, or perhaps the voice of hope. *She may return your feelings. Maybe she has to declare them to break the curse.*

Then why hasn't she said it?

My face catches on a reflection. There's one good reason.

But she has to love you for who you truly are.

And what am I? Not a monster, perhaps. But not human.

But hers. Utterly hers. Always hers.

I start to plan out my confession. I can't pack how I feel about Rose into three little words. She deserves more. She'll *need* more. I cannot merely spurt out my feelings and pray she will reply.

I turn to the books, searching for inspiration, other people's words to steal, and walk around my room, practising.

I really hope the fairies aren't watching.

"Rose, I must tell you, before you leave, that I have come to care for you as I have cared for no one else. I have tried to tell you this, many times, but I do not think you fully understand the scope, the depth, of my feelings for you. It matters not if you can return the sentiment, and I will not pressure you to in any way, but it must be known. The unspoken words between us are agony against my heart, and I must speak them.

"Rose, I love you, with all that I am, with all my soul. I did not know the shape of myself until I knew you, until I saw myself through your eyes. I knew the seasons before you came, but I had never known the sun. You are the light of my life; the music, the colour. Every other good thing in the world is a shadow next to you. You are folded into the fabric of my heart, and there you shall remain until I am naught but dust. When I die, and my earthly body crumbles, whatever I am shall remain with you. My only hope is that you allow it to, that you somehow return my feelings. I want to be with you in whatever way I can. Whatever sliver of affection you can afford, I will take. And if you do not..."

My Rose, my darling, my doom. I am so glad I met you, and so sorry. My heart is inexorably entwined with yours. It is not your fault.



I figure the declaration should be accompanied by some sort of grand gesture, which causes me no end of stress. I fret about it all night, twitching as I walk to breakfast. "Any ideas?" I ask the castle.

One of the fairies appears in front of me. I reach out to her, but already she's darting away. Ariel, almost certainly.

She flies into the ballroom, and I stop short.

We rarely come in here, but it's impossibly beautiful, especially with the blooms cascading down through the roof. Half of the space is a dense tapestry of flowers.

Ariel twinkles on the chandelier. Light rays over the marble.

"Of course!" I smile. "Ariel, you're a genius."

Was that my imagination, or did I hear a snort of agreement behind that twinkle?

Either way, she's gone by the time Rose arrives. I race towards her, breaking into a smile as I seize her hands.

"Let's have a ball before you leave," I declare.

"A ball?"

"Yes. Fine dining, beautiful music, fabulous clothing, slightly clumsy dancing."

"I am not sure I have the time to create something fabulous to wear..."

"Anything you wear will be made fabulous by proximity."

"Oh, you—"

I twirl her under my arm, almost certain she's blushing, hardly daring to believe it. "So, what do you say?"

"Yes," she says, "I say yes."

It is a beautiful day, so, at lunchtime, we pack ourselves a picnic and head to the lake. It is humming with life, completely separate from that frozen wasteland it was when Rose first arrived. A painter couldn't have made it any more perfect.

After we eat, I catch Rose glaring at the still, shining water like one might a nemesis. She stands up abruptly and starts unlacing her dress.

My heart skips a beat. "What—what are you doing?"

Her dress pools to the ground. She stands in only a slip of a petticoat, every soft curve as clear as a cloud. Her skin shines through her single thin layer. *Everything* shines through it.

"Facing a fear," she says, striding towards the water's edge. "Would you like to join me?"

My mouth goes dry, my words evaporating, but I pull off my shirt and hurtle into the water after her, swimming ahead. She sticks to the shallows, her resolve quickly stiffening.

I call back to her. "You won't drown, you know, if you go out of your depth," I say. "Not while I'm around."

"I know," she says, looking around her, "I've just never been the best of swimmers."

"I'll teach you."

We both ignore the fact that there is only so much we can do in the time we have left, and I hold out my hands. She lets me pull her in. The second her feet leave the floor, she lets out a squeal, clinging to my arms.

"Don't let go!"

"I won't," I say, holding her closer, "not until you want me to."

She quickly grows more confident, and soon slides away from me, twisting and turning, the water clinging to her pale body. We must spend hours out there, chasing each other, diving under the surface, grabbing at arms and wrists, Bramble joining in on the fun.

When we finally emerge and shake ourselves dry, Rose squeals.

"I'm sorry!" I rush, releasing I've just splashed her like a dog.

She laughs, kissing my cheek. "You are so very sweet when you're flustered."



On the day of the full moon, the two of us pack enough food to last us an entire day and spend all of it outside. We eat breakfast in the orchard and read aloud poems of summer and nature, before heading to the lake for another swimming session. Rose almost makes it to the island in the centre, before quietly panicking and turning back. She rarely wears her panic, I notice. Rarely lets anyone see it. She just freezes momentarily and moves away from whatever unnerves her. I wonder how much she's been afraid of that no one has noticed, if anyone at all knows of the fears she shares with me.

We have a long, slow, hazy lunch, savouring every delectable morsel and crumb and treating ourselves to a delicate champagne. It pairs perfectly with everything.

We try to pretend this isn't likely the last time we'll do this, what with me usually needing a day to recover from the change, and the ball to plan. We keep the conversation light and avoid anything that sounds like goodbye.

“It’s beautiful,” says Rose, and saddles up against me. Before I quite understand what’s happened, she’s curled into my arms. Her gaze fixes firmly on the lake. “Everything is so beautiful here.”

Bramble nuzzles against my leg. I inhale the scent of Rose’s hair, mint and apple blossom, and grasp at the thin warmth of her against my chest. I feel like it will cave beneath the pressure. This moment is so pure, so perfect, that I don’t want it to end. But it is a glass bauble of a moment, spinning towards the ground.

The sun slithers behind the mountains. Darkness trails in, not far behind. Fireflies blossom along the surface of the lake. The moon, larger and more intrusive than ever, glares down.

“Rose—” I start.

“Not yet,” she replies, snuggling into my chest.

“It’s time.”

She nods silently, packing up our things, setting off in the direction of the crypt. There is no time to head back to the castle, and no reason to either.

A storm rumbles overhead. Bramble growls.

Rose rubs his head. “Head back to the castle, boy.”

Bramble looks up at the sky doubtfully, and then at me, as if weighing up his options.

“Go on,” Rose urges him. “It’s all right.”

He soon scampers off, his head bowed slightly, as if he’s ashamed of abandoning his mistress.

“Perhaps you should join him,” I suggest. “You don’t want to get caught in a storm.”

“I don’t mind.”

I want to slide my fingers into hers, like I have seen so many other lovers do, but my hands are not fashioned like theirs. That action is beyond me. But I grasp her hand, folding my huge palms around hers, and she squeezes back.

Do friends hold hands like this? Can I ask her that?

Lightning splits through the sky, followed shortly by a downpour. The day has been so hot that it sizzles on the stone. We are still five minutes or so from our destination.

“Quickly, over here—” I pull her into a nearby bandstand, sheltering her under my arms. At least the size of them is good for something. Time is ticking away from us. “It might blow over soon,” I tell her.

She places her head against my chest. “I’m in no hurry.”

Suddenly, I’m in no hurry either, but I know we’ll have to go. We wait as long as we dare, the lightning and thunder growing closer and closer, and then finally we race out, hand in hand as we dash towards the graveyard.

Something flashes across our path. Rose screams. “Thorn!”

Lightning strikes a nearby tree, as straight and sure as an arrow. The whole thing comes crashing down. In an instant, Rose’s hand is yanked from mine. I am dragged under, swallowed under branch and bark. Something hard and sharp sears against my calf, and there is the rising smell of smoke.

There is another roar of thunder, and hands scramble through the foliage, Rose’s scream following them.

“I’m... I’m all right—” I reach for her hand, and her face appears before me. “I’m... I’m stuck. My leg—”

“Thorn, the tree is on fire.”

I squirm against the branches. None are too wide. “I know. Don’t worry. I think I can get myself out—”

“It’s really on fire!” Rose snatches her hand back, snapping the twigs, following the rest of me down to my leg. She stops shortly, her eyes wide. “Oh, oh no...”

“Rose, Rose! It’s all right.” I fumble desperately for her hand, clutching it closely. I won’t be able to feel my leg if I’m holding onto her. “In a few minutes, I’ll change. I’m stronger then. I can get myself out. But listen—you cannot be here when that happens.”

Rose is trembling. Tears line her face. “I am not leaving you like this!”

I swallow, wishing I could explain how much that means to me. But there isn’t time. Or the words. “Rose, you have to.”

“The tree is on fire and you’re bleeding really badly—”

“I’m aware. It’s fine, I can’t feel it—”

“I can.”

“Please.” I groan. My leg is really starting to hurt. “Go back to the castle. I need to know you’re safe.”

“Thorn... you could die.”

“Please, Rose!” Pain grips my head. I curl inwards, still clutching her hand. For a moment, she is my tether. But I need her to leave. “Rose!”

Rose closes her eyes, and turns away. She starts to run.

The smoke burns. My blood boils. I feel myself slipping away—

A scream rips through me, making Rose still, just for a second.

I urge the change to come faster, just the once, to get me free before I burn to death. But then I see Rose still weaving her way towards the castle, and I need her to be safe first.

Crash.

Another tree swerves in front of her, cutting across her path. She turns left, towards the kitchens. *Good. Smart. Keep moving.*

Lightning strikes the steps before she can reach them. A chasm opens between her and the door.

No!

She wheels back towards the graveyard. How is this happening? This is not normal, not natural.

Moya. This is her doing.

If you hurt her, I will find a way to destroy you. I swear it.

But I’m in no condition to do this now. Pain floods me, and I let it. I want to destroy.



Once more, I am forced to bear witness, dragged along through the beast’s gaze, an entity of pain. The gash in our leg bleeds heavily, puddles of red turned silver in the moonlight.

The beast is chasing Rose as she runs for the ruined chapel. It has no door, nothing the lightning can attack.

But there’s no way to bar the beast out, either.

The storm is relentless. Lightning explodes statue after statue. I pray for a bolt to hit us, but of course, it doesn’t.

Moya wants us to reach Rose.

She dives into the chapel, cursing its lack of doors, and charges towards the crypt entrance. A window shatters. Pews skid. Her foot hits a seat and she goes flying, wrenching herself up as we sail over her, blocking her escape. She scrambles

backwards, tripping into the debris. Her back hits the wall.

There is nowhere for her to go.

“Thorn—” She holds up her hands. “It’s me, it’s Rose. You know me, I know you do.”

I do, I do. I know you. I love you. I won’t hurt you. I won’t. I won’t, I refuse!

The beast does not hear, does not obey. He does not appear to. He creeps towards her, snarling, growling.

“Thorn, you don’t want to hurt me. You were willing to risk your life to keep me safe... I was willing to risk mine to save you.” Tears are streaming down her face. If I hurt her, I pray my end comes swiftly. I do not want to be alone with this memory for one moment. “Thorn, dearest, just listen—”

I throw my gaze around the room, searching for something to impale myself on, something to prevent me. *Do something. Anything!*

Rose starts to hum.

The beast slows, but does not stop. Her voice touches something within even him. She raises it against the crescendo of the storm, louder and louder with each crash of lightning. Another window shatters, then another. The wind tears at the building, howling, screaming. My eyes are fixed on Rose, like a sailor’s might fix on a lighthouse.

I am stronger than you, Moya, I whisper into the void. For there is one force in the world you cannot beat. I love her. You cannot make me hurt her.

“Thorn?” Rose’s gaze is hopeful.

I open my mouth to respond, but no words come.

Rose keeps singing. Mother’s song.

I shake my head, trying to shake the monster from me. She calls my name again.

It’s not enough. I only have a few seconds of control. I can feel the monster snapping back into place. He is going to kill her.

Unless I die first.

I spy one of the windows, and launch myself out of it. Hard, painful blackness crushes inwards.

Chapter Eighteen



The Solstice

I do not know how I spend the rest of the night. I don't even know when I wake, or where I am. Wet grass. A tree. Glass all around me. What little I feel of my body has been replaced with foam. Everything else is pain.

There's a person, calling my name. A warmth somewhere, like the sun behind a cloud. Too far away for me to grasp.

Rose. I feel her before I see her.

I don't know how I move, how I get back towards the castle. There's lights, bright and burning.

Ariel. Margaret. Ophelia.

And Rose, always Rose.

She sets me down on the bed and sets to work cleaning my wounds. If she speaks, I don't hear her. Every now and again I'm dragged back by pain, the clink of glass in a basin, the smell of peppermint.

I glance down. My body is wrapped in white.

Rose has taken one of my hands. It is crushed against her lips. I cannot feel them.

“Thorn,” she whispers, her voice hoarse, “Thorn, my dearest, I am so sorry. If I had only—”

I don’t know what she’s apologising for, but tears are spilling from her eyes. I wipe one away. “You’re safe,” I tell her numbly. “You are all that matters.”

“You matter,” she returns, her voice like cut glass. She sounds injured.

She puts her head against my neck, and I find the strength to press a hand against her back. Rose inches back almost immediately.

“I’m just going to get something,” she says. “I won’t be long.”

I think I nod, even though I don’t want her to go, don’t understand where she’s going or what’s going on. Time and feeling has turned to slush. The room isn’t steady. I grab the bedpost instead of her. Bramble whines nearby. Where has she gone? What day is it?

I startle when she reappears, not noticing her until she’s beside me.

“You came back.” For some reason, I was sure she was gone. Or perhaps I had conjured her up entirely. She was never here at all, just a vision summoned by an intermingling of madness and longing.

She strokes my cheek. “Where else would I go?”

“Elsewhere,” I mutter, leaning into that touch. “I’m always... so scared... that you will go.”

Rose says nothing to this, possibly because she *is* going, so there’s no reassurance she can offer me. She pulls back the covers and eases me towards the pillows. The room spirals above me, and I’m hot and cold at the same time.

Rose heaps on another blanket. There’s a faint twinkling nearby, and Rose thanks someone. A few moments later, soup is being lifted to my mouth. I drink, but I don’t want to. I want to call out, but I can’t. Blackness sparks at my vision.

I tread the precipice of sleep, neither unconscious nor awake. I’m plied with potions that do something and nothing. Rose reads from *Tromeo and Lessida*, my favourite. I catch snatches of it.

“The immeasurable weight of her smile lay against his soul, and he knew, in that moment, it was enough that he had known, and loved her. That glance alone would carry him through all the years without her...”

I dream that Rose never escaped, that I wake under the apple tree with her body in my arms. My heart cracks in my chest, but it cannot break me fast enough.

What have I done?

What has Moya done?

I plunge out of the darkness into a syrupy light, launching away from her. My breath heaves against my lungs.

“What? What is it?” Rose comes towards me. “Thorn?”

“You’re all right,” I breathe.

“Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I be? It’s you I’m worried about.”

“I thought... I must have been dreaming...”

Rose places a hand against my cheek, stroking my hair. It is curiously cold, almost soothing. “I’m fine,” she says, her voice as light as a touch. “You aren’t. Lie back down again.”

I only half-hear her. Her fingers move to my head, the ghost of a smile in her features.

“You have bed hair,” she says, making a feeble attempt to pat it down. “It’s sweet.”

I catch her eyes briefly. Sweet? Anything about my form is *sweet*? “Why aren’t you afraid of me?” I ask. “Why are you so sure I won’t hurt you?”

Rose swallows, as if the question hurts her. "Because I know you," she says, and this time, she leans forward and pulls me carefully into her arms, kissing the top of my cheek, smoothing my hair. I let her lie me back down. There is no strength in me to resist, even though I don't want to fall back into those nightmares. I close my hand around hers. "Rose?"

"Yes?"

"Please don't leave."

She strokes my face with her free hand. "I'm not going anywhere."

But you are. You are. And you will take whatever I am with you.

When I wake again, it's morning, although I have lost track of time. Rose is sitting beside the window in the pale blue light of dawn, her face etched with shadows.

"Have you been there all night?"

She gives me a smile almost as weak as the sun. "I slept," she tells me. "Have no fear." She crosses the room to check my forehead. "How do you feel?"

"A little better," I tell her, because it seems like the thing I should say. I feel more present, which is almost worse. Everything pulses with pain.

"You seem a little more coherent today."

"I'm sorry if I worried you."

"You did," she says. "But I'm all right as long as you're all right."

She brings over the breakfast tray, and we eat a little together. I cannot manage much.

"My leg hurts."

"I'll change your bandages for you."

A fresh set is summoned, along with more warm, tingly waters. She cleans my other injuries first. Her face goes pale when she looks at my leg.

"Does the fountain water heal infections?" she asks.

"Usually. Why?"

"Just wondering if I should boil the water first, is all."

I smile at her thoughtfulness, and try not to wince as she doctors me.

"Any better?"

"A little, thank you."

"Is there anything I can do?"

My heart thumps. "Just... stay with me." *For the little time we have left.*

"Well," says Rose breezily, crawling up bedside me, "that I can manage."

Hotness floods me, and not because of my injuries. My mouth goes dry. "Are you... planning on sitting there?"

"Unless you'd rather I sit somewhere else?"

"No," I say quickly, wishing I had the strength or the courage to hold her. "Nowhere else."

She slips her hand into mine and folds it around my middle, and I pretend to sleep so that I can spare her the pain of seeing mine, raw and ripe though it is.



I linger in this helpless state for days, cold and hot, exhausted and restless. There are moments when I feel almost normal, but they are fewer and far between. Food turns to paste in my mouth and I can barely eat.

Rose stays beside me almost the entire time, reading and whispering, holding me through the worst of it and cheering me up when she can.

I wonder if she would do this for anyone, this care and this attention.

Once, when I was a boy, I sickened with something. Fey are immune to most illnesses, but apparently my mortal side won out. The fairies fretted for days, taking it in shifts so I was never alone. That is not so different from what Rose is doing, I suppose.

She called me 'dearest'.

Margaret called you that once, too.

Before she leaves, I need to ask her. I need to tell her how I feel. If I die immediately, she'll think I've died of this.

And maybe I won't die.

I won't be able to dazzle her at the ball, though. Not like this.

"We may have to think of an alternative plan."

Rose puts down the book she's reading, blinking as though I've gone mad. "Plan for what?"

"Our ball. I'm not entirely sure I'll be up for dancing. I won't be nearly as charming and graceful as I usually am."

Rose smiles at me. "You must be feeling better, if you're making jokes."

"Jokes? I'm expressing extreme remorse. I was looking rather forward to the whole thing." I pause, hoping she understands. "I will miss seeing you in your dress."

"I can still wear a dress. Shall I fetch it now?"

She does not fetch it, but she climbs onto my bed and lies down beside me, chatting quietly until I fall asleep, her fingers stroking my arm.

I fool myself into thinking I feel better the next day, putting on a display of brightness for her. I know she will not want to go if she doesn't think I'm well enough, and I refuse to be the reason she's kept from her family again.

On her last night, we make an effort to do something. A decent meal arrives, we play board games in bed, and then lie there listening to beautiful music play on our music box. We talk until we run out of energy, both avoiding anything that sounds like goodbye.

The darkness is creeping in again. I am tired, so tired. "Rose? You won't... you won't leave before I wake, will you?"

"Of course not," she says, sounding almost cross.

I relax a little. I still have time to explain. I just need to rest for a while, before I speak to her. "Good. I have a few things to tell you, before you go."

"I might have a few things, too."

I want to wonder what those might be, but I do not have the energy. I slide down into the dark.



I'm lost in the darkness, vast, but not empty. The air seems to crawl, as if filled with insects. Shadows dart around me.

"You've lost, little beast," calls a high, cruel voice. "She's gone. She left you."

"You... you're lying!"

"Does it matter if I am?" A pale, twisted face appears before me. Hard to believe it was once almost identical to Mother's. At the moment, she seems less human than I am. "You're dying anyway."

"I'm not going to die," I insist, because somewhere, out of this dark, Rose is by my side. I can't leave her.

Moya smiles. "Are you not?" she says. "Then open your eyes."

I try to. I shudder myself into what I think is consciousness, but I can't open my eyes. I can't move. I'm still trapped in a black, shapeless place. Moya has vanished, but my leg radiates pain, my lungs feel like iron.

Something is pawing at me, yelling my name. I want to cry out, but I can't. It hurts. Everything hurts.

Lights overhead, a faint twinkling, and then a new pain, worse than the rest; the feeling of Rose being wrenched from my side.

No, no, no, come back—

Has she gone? Has she left me? Abandoned me for dead to return to her family?

Not so easily, surely? Not so quickly—

The pain in my chest expands, burning through me like a dry log. I feel like I am going to crack in two.

Where is she?

More than ever, I want to scream for her, but I am pulled down, down, into the dark.

"Don't you dare!"

Painlessness, for a moment, a furious cry. Rose? It sounds like Rose.

But it is Grace's face above me, shaking me. No, go away. Let me die.

"She's gone," I croak.

"She is trying to save you!" Grace hisses. "And if you die now... if you *give up* now, I will haunt you for the rest of eternity. You think you know guilt now? Just wait until I'm through with you!"

I stretch around, searching for Rose's shape in the thick, cloying blackness, some tendril of warmth to seize hold of. But there is nothing, nowhere.

"I can't... I can't feel her."

"That's because she's searching for something. She's coming back."

Something shifts in the air, magic or realisation, I'm not sure. "The gateway is open."

Grace stills. "Yes."

The dark rolls away to grey, and I am looking at the meadow, at the fog parting to reveal a stream. A young man around my age is on the other side of it, with dark red hair like Rose's.

"Freedom." Grace sighs beside me.

He is screaming at the void, calling for Rose.

"Freed?" I see Rose, a red spot amidst the gloom. "Freedom, I'm here!"

"Come here!" he calls. "*Come home!*"

"I'm coming!" Rose's voice icicles through me. *No, no, don't leave—* "I'm coming, I promise! It just... it might take me a while. I'm safe, I promise! I'll be home soon!"

"Where are you?"

The fog swallows him up, and I am back in the dark with Grace.

"She stayed for you," she says tartly, "so if you're not there when she gets back—"

She doesn't want me to die. It doesn't mean she loves me.

"Thorn!" Grace hisses, sensing my hesitation, or my terror. "Go back!"

"But—"

Another voice, calling my name. Not Rose's, not this time. Another name, given to me by another person, long, long ago.

Keane. Keane. Come back.

"Mother?"

Not yet, my dearheart. Hold on a little longer.

Grace tugs at my hand, but when I turn back to her, it's Rose standing there, her face streaming with tears. "Please, Thorn!" she begs.

I am jolted back into something like life. Something is being rammed into my mouth, but I cannot move. I can't breathe. I can't speak. Oh gods, am I going to die? Somewhere, somewhere in the room, I feel Rose's presence. A quiet drop of cold in this bitter, burning heat. I can hear her calling to me.

I cannot go where she is not. My soul belongs with hers. I fixate on that thought, imagining my heart rising out of my chest, faint golden threads weaving towards hers. I cannot go, I cannot.

Someone is yelling at her. Ariel? It has been so long since I have heard her voice...

"Quickly, Rose, apply the paste!"

Something like cold, and a sharp pain in my leg, different from the suffocating, radiating agony. It goes on and on, and I want to slide back into the dark, but I don't. I am pinned to this world by the feel of *her* beside me.

The clinking of something above, china against my teeth. "He won't drink!" Ophelia cries.

Rose snatches it from her and prys open my mouth. I don't have the strength to move, no matter how much I want to.

"Thorn, you have to drink this." Rose's voice is stretched, pained. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I don't want to disappoint you...* "Please, Thorn!"

"Tilt his head!"

Rose struggles underneath me. I am conscious of movement, of my body falling and rising, of Rose scrambling for me. Liquid floods my mouth, and I want to swallow, but I can't. Everything is so hard and heavy.

"Please!"

"It's not working."

"It has to!"

Something presses against my mouth. Not hard and cold, but warm and pleasant. A breath slips into me.

Wake up. Drink. Breathe.

Someone gasps. Ariel?

I splutter, cough up most of the liquid, and open my eyes.

I am in Rose's lap, her face shining, inches above. Half a desperate, fleeting smile glimmers in her face.

She places a pot to my lips. "You need to drink," she says.

Chapter Nineteen



The Tomb

I sleep in her arms, more restful than I have been in days. I think I try to tell her that I love her, but she sings me to sleep instead.

But I want to tell her. My courage may be gone when I wake. If I tell her I love her now, I'm not sure it will matter if she doesn't say it back. My heart is too well held to break. And if it does... I will die here, in her arms, as I feel I was always meant to. No other death for me but her.

I drift back to consciousness, quietly, steadily. The room is humming. I hear voices.

"That was a very brave thing you did last night, my dear."

Margaret?

Rose is stroking my face. It's nice. I hope she won't stop when she knows I'm awake. "Wouldn't you have stayed?"

There is a slight pause before she replies. "Yes," she says firmly, "I would have. But my reasons for saving him... might not be the same as yours."

"I don't know what you mean."

"By the time you do, it may be too late."

I murmur something, testing my voice.

“Well,” Margaret says quickly, “we have plenty to be getting on with. Come on, girls...”

They vanish with a crack, before I can stop them. I open my eyes, blinking up at Rose. She is wrapped up beside me.

“Who are you talking to?” I ask.

Rose smiles. “I believe they said their names were Ariel, Ophelia and Margaret.”

“They can talk again?”

“Quite a bit, apparently.”

“We’ll never have a moment’s peace now.” I try to pretend I’m not thrilled, but I don’t think it works. I shift upwards, leaning back against the pillows, enjoying feeling halfway normal. The last few days come sliding back, thick and hazy, details obscured by pain and fever. “What... what day is it?”

Rose looks away. “The gateway opened yesterday.”

“Oh, Rose, I didn’t know—” *Hoped I was wrong, for your sake—*

“It’s all right.”

“You should have—”

“It’s all right.”

“I’m so sorry—”

“It’s all right!”

But her face betrays what her words will not, and a second later her heart goes spilling out everywhere into guttural, noisy sobs.

She cries for what feels like hours, almost as erratically as I did when my mother disappeared. Raw, insensible, unadulterated grief. She goes completely limp in my arms, and I hold her until the cries subside.

She eases back, brushing away her tears. “I think... I think I’m done now.”

I was so, so grateful when she stayed, but now all I fear is the sheer guilt of what she has given up. Seeing her so miserable makes me almost wish she had just left. It would be easier to die than watch her like this. “You... you should have gone.”

“I couldn’t,” she snuffles.

“Why not?” *Say it, please. Tell me why.*

Rose turns away from me. “You shouldn’t ask me that.”

“I’m sorry.” I pause, pondering the meaning of her words. “Is it because you promised me that you wouldn’t leave, because I didn’t mean—”

Rose scuttles to her feet. “What sort of person do you think I am?” Her tone is venomous. “Do you think I am devoid of feeling? Do you think I am cold, heartless? That I have come to feel nothing for you? I was scared you were going to *die*, Thorn! I could never have left you! I didn’t... the thought didn’t even cross my mind, you know? All... all I could think about was you. If I could think at all.”

I inch forward. “Rose—”

“It’s all right,” she snaps. “I just... I need to...”

But what she needs, I never quite discover. She sweeps out of the room a moment later.



She stayed for me. She gave up a chance to see her family again, for me. She said anyone would have done the same, but would they? Would anyone sit by my side, hour after hour, a warm presence in the gloom? Would anyone else share my

bed, hold me like she did, so unafraid and so caring?

But then my heart plummets. Does it matter how much she cares for me? She has just given up her family for my sake. I fear she may never forgive me.

You could let her go, says a voice at the back of my head. *You did it before. There's enough magic for you to do it again—*

But if I let her go, I will die. Would she forgive me for *that*?

If she ever found out.

"What sort of person do you think I am?"

She is a good person, the sort that would never leave someone to die, perhaps not even a complete stranger. Perhaps she believes everyone would do the same as she. I'm not sure Grace would have left, if she'd known what it cost me, and that was just flowers and company. Rose would never have forgiven herself if she'd let me die.

But still... *all I could think about was you.*

Is it too much to hope that perhaps she feels the same?

Rose has been gone mere seconds when three buzzing balls of light come streaming out of nowhere. One of them races around my head, nuzzling my cheeks.

"Thoooooorn!" Ophelia's unmistakably cheerful sing-song voice is a melody to my ears. It has been so long since I've heard it.

I smile, holding out my hand. "You never called me that before."

"But I really, really like it! It really suits you!"

"I'm glad you approve."

"So, she's the one, right? The one we have been waiting for?"

Margaret tutters in the corner by the teapot. "Ophelia, you've said that about the last six."

"But this one's my favourite..."

I can almost see her small, pouting face. I can almost see them all. Ophelia whizzes back to Margaret's side, helping her with the tea. Ariel hovers beside me. I can feel her invisible glare.

"So," I begin, "I imagine, now that you can talk again, you have a lot to say."

"Oh, dear boy, I have a *list*."

"I was afraid of that."

"Where to begin, where to begin, OH WAIT, I KNOW. This beautiful maiden that you have ensnared—"

"I have not ensnared her!"

"Semantics, boy, semantics."

"I'm not sure I like being called *boy*. I'm fairly sure my mother wouldn't approve, if she were still around."

"Well, I knew your mother much better than you, and she always greatly appreciated my sass—"

"I find this difficult to believe."

"Be that as it may, my point remains. Rose. Here. Girl. Beautiful. Likes books. Doesn't run from the sight of you. What more do you want in a mate?"

"Ariel..." I say warningly.

"Why haven't you told her how you feel?"

I exhale deeply. I barely know the full answer to this, I only know that I am afraid. Terrified of telling her. Ariel seems to read this answer.

"What do you have to lose?"

"Everything," I reply. "Everything that I am, that this place is... it hangs on her response."

"But that's her response. Not your confession."

“And if she doesn’t return the sentiment?” I try to forget the feeling of my heart breaking, when I thought that she had gone before. It is not an experience I’m keen to repeat. “I need to... I need to be sure, before I frighten her away.”

“She seems fairly fearless. I’m not sure she would run, whatever you told her.”

“If that’s the case, and she feels the same, I wonder why she hasn’t spoken up herself.”

“She is scared, I think,” Ariel replies. “Although I’m not sure of what, yet.”

I think of Grace’s words. *Of suffering like her father has suffered*. I have an idea, but I am not sure enough to speak it. It is too much like wishful thinking.

“Thorn’s in love!” Ophelia hands me a teacup and skims around the brim, apparently oblivious to the conversation that’s just transpired. “Finally! After all this time! Oh, we’re going to have bodies again, and parties, and the others will return, and maybe the Queen—”

“Slow down, ’Phelia,” Margaret says softly. “You are getting ahead of yourself.”

“I’ve been waiting *years* to be this happy!”

“Nevertheless, you mustn’t celebrate prematurely—”

“You’re right.” She comes to a sudden stop, then whizzes towards me. “I’ll celebrate when we’re free! Thorn, go and tell Rose you love her, right now!”

“Ophelia—” says Margaret warningly.

“Why? What’s he waiting for?”

“He’s afraid.”

“Of what?”

“Of her not loving him back.”

Ophelia’s little form seems to pale. “But... but she *must*,” she insists, her voice wavering. “Why... why wouldn’t she?”

Ophelia’s optimism prickles in my chest. It has been so long since I have spoken with them that I had forgotten how lovely she could be.

“Well, there’s a couple of reasons,” says Ariel realistically. “I mean, he’s not playing the prince card, for one. Girls like a financially stable husband.”

“I hear they also like men the same species as them,” I add.

“That too.”

“Hmm,” says Margaret, “if only we had some way of actually *asking* her...”

“Oh, *fine*,” Ariel sighs defeatedly. “I’ll do it.”

A wave of nerves trembles inside me. “Do... what, precisely?”

“Befriend Rose. Learn what’s going on in that head of hers. Report back. Spy on her...”

“You sound way too delighted at this prospect.”

Margaret mutters something about just asking Rose outright as Ariel twirls around the bedpost. “Girl’s got to have some fun.”

“Ariel, have you ever actually talked to a human being? They have... feelings, you know.”

“I have feelings! Somewhere! Around.”

“I’m not sure you befriending Rose is the best of ideas.”

“Why not? I already like her. We’ve talked. Ophelia isn’t the most cunning of people and Margaret’s too... Margaret.”

“Thank you, Ariel.”

“You’re welcome.”

Margaret, still tutting under her breath, whisks the tea tray away. Ophelia nuzzles my face and vanishes with her. It is only me and Ariel.

“She cares about you, you know,” she says. “Went crazy when you were...”

"I don't doubt that." I sigh, staring at the empty fireplace. "I'm just not sure it's *enough*."

"Her brother came for her, you know. Called to her across the gateway."

"I know."

"He was very attractive."

I have no idea why this is relevant. Luckily, she carries on.

"I don't think she would have given up that chance for anyone."

But I think she would have. I would never have left someone to die alone, not even Isabella, Miranda or Angelica or someone who despised me. I would have given them another six months of my life, not to bear the guilt of desertion.

Ariel's form shrivels, and I sense she is about to disappear. She's spent too long voiceless, I'm sure she's forgotten that one usually says goodbye.

"Ariel?"

Her form expands again. "Yes?"

"It's really good to see you again."

Her light brightens, and I can almost feel her smile. "It's good to be seen."



Rose returns to my side the following morning, silently sweeping into the room and depositing herself in the chair beside the hearth, tucking her legs underneath her and whipping out a book. There is nothing about her demeanour that suggests she stormed out of here the day before.

I stare at her solidly for a long while. "Are you still cross with me?"

Rose raises her eyes from her book, barely looking at me. "You should know by now that I am rarely cross with you."

My throat feels tight. "I didn't know that." I say. "What... what are you angry about, then?"

"It's difficult to explain."

"Could you—"

"Thorn," she says quietly, "please don't."

I nod. What else can I do? As much as I want to crack open that head of hers and spill every thought and secret into the space between us, I can't. I don't merely want to know what's going on in her head. I want her to *share* it.

"The fairies have been in," I remark instead. "I never... I never thought to hear their voices again. I truly believed they were lost to this world."

"Who are they, to you?" she asks.

"My family," I reply. "Or as near as I had to one, until..."

"Until you met me?"

"Yes." I don't think I hide the longing in my voice.

"It's all right," says Rose, meeting my gaze only for a moment, "I feel the same."

The weight of her words slides through me like a blade, beautiful and awful, all at once. I want to be her family. But I'm increasingly worried that she sees me only as that; as something familial. A brother, maybe. Like the one who came for her.

Neither of us says what we both must be thinking: that Rose already has a family, a family that is missing her. A family she longs to return to.



I remain resting for another three days, giving my leg a chance to recover, and trying not to enjoy the fuss Rose heaps on me, now that I'm well enough to enjoy it, or the constant twittering of the fairies, now that I can hear them.

She doesn't spend every moment by my side. Glad, no doubt, to finally have some freedom, but one night she dozes off in the chair in my room, reading *Tromeo and Lessida*. She must have read it a dozen times in the last week.

Ariel appears above the food tray. I can tell it's her almost immediately. I'm not sure if they have different sizes or auras, but it is as easy to tell them apart as when they had faces.

"Hello again, Ariel." I grin. "Where have you been, today?"

"Fixing the mess you two have made in the gardens. Ophelia is quite beside herself."

"I really am very sorry—"

She groans. "Rose is right. You apologise far too much."

"And how long have you been talking to Rose for, Ariel?"

"A while. She's a better listener than you. I like her."

"I'm glad." I glance over to her, unable to speak the true weight of my affections with her so close by. "I like her too."

I know she has no real body, but I can hear Ariel rolling her eyes. "Yes, we noticed. She's your *favourite soul in this whole wide world*."

"I did not say that."

"I'm fairly sure you did. It's a little over the top, don't you think?"

"No," I say quietly, "it isn't."

"You two are impossible. Good night. Don't waste the next six months. Margaret is making a dress for this belated ball. PS *SAY SOMETHING TO HER*."

"Goodnight, Ariel."

"Goodnight, sweet prince," she says mockingly. "Sleep well."



The next day, I am beyond bored of lying inside. I drag myself out of bed, pull on fresh clothes, and insist on going for a walk. Rose does not object, but she hovers beside me as if she means to catch me if I stumble. I try not to be too afraid of squashing her.

Whether by a new burst of magic or the work of the fairies, the gardens have been transformed. They are more beautiful than ever. We wander down to the lake, and take a path that up until recently had been completely overgrown. It stops just before the shore.

There, right beside the water's edge, is my father's tomb.

It is a small stone building, guarded by fairy statues, and as far away from the graveyard as possible. I asked Margaret about it, once.

"She met him by the lake," she said. "And I don't think she wanted him to rest in a place of death. He was always so full of life, your father."

Until he wasn't. Until Moya ran him through and turned his heart to stone, severing all chance I had of ever knowing the man who sired me.

Rose looks to me, and tries the door without a word. We walk into the smooth, round chamber, filled with natural light. The roof, what is left of it, is glass, and ivy tumbles in and wraps around the opening of a shallow pool. It looks almost natural, but there is a clear, man-made incline where my father's statue sits with its legs half in the water. A speck of light touches his half-hidden face.

"Incredible," Rose breathes.

"I had forgotten this," I say. Not quite *forgotten*, of course. But not thought of it in so long. I never haunted this place like I did Mother's room, searching for a scrap of life. There was such a finality to his end, and not hers.

I step forward, reaching a hand towards the statue.

I wonder if I look like that, now.

My hand trembles at the thought, and I yank it back.

"What is it?" Rose asks.

"Nothing," I reply, and turn my gaze upwards towards the ceiling.

Rose has no such reservations. She moves closer to the statue and pulls the ivy from its face. He has a straight nose, large eyes, cheekbones both soft and angular.

Rose cannot look away. "Who is he?"

"His name was Leo Valerdene," I tell her, after a long pause. I explain it like a tale, something fanciful and made-up. "Or so the story says. He was a great lover of nature who one day, quite by accident, wandered into the realm of the fairies. The Queen of the Fairies found him bathing in the lake, and they were instantly smitten with each other. Now, the Queen of the Fairies had had many lovers in her lifetime, but none like him. They courted for many years, and, eventually, she decided to make him her husband. There was some outrage, of course. A human? In the court of fairies? For years he had been looked on as little more than a favoured pet, someone who would leave as soon as the Queen tired of him. But now, after centuries of life, she had finally chosen a husband, and a human no less. Would they even be able to have children, provide an heir for the throne? Fairies can live a long time, and as such, have never been the most fertile of creatures. But the Queen cared not for any of this. She loved him so. The court came to understand this."

"They accepted him?"

"They were married for ten years."

"What happened then?"

I hesitate for a moment. I have never had to tell the story. I never knew how hard it was to speak the ending. "He died," I manage. "The Queen built this place to mark his tomb, and remember the moment she had fallen in love with him."

"It is a beautiful tomb."

"I am told it is a beautiful story."

"You don't like it?"

"I don't like stories that end in death."

Rose reaches out to touch Leo's face, a strange, longing look in her expression.

"Do you find him handsome?"

"Yes," she says.

I snort, hardly knowing why I'm annoyed, and sweep out of the room.

Chapter Twenty



The Longing

I ponder on Rose's reaction to Leo's statue as I struggle to sleep. She was clearly drawn to him, admitted she found him attractive. Does that bother me? Why did I ask?

I suppose, as I have always imagined his face to be mine, or as close to it, I wanted to know if she found *me* attractive, if she would like me when she breaks the spell.

If she breaks the spell.

There were memories of my father's that I played repeatedly, the moments when he was happiest. Playing with his siblings as a child, listening to his grandparents' stories, composing poems in the woods, meeting my mother, marrying her, laughing with the fairies, learning I was coming.

There was one memory I never asked to see, not until I was almost an adult myself.

"Show me how my father died."

Mother was away, some fairy skirmish outside our borders. Arranged, of course, by Moya. She snuck into the palace and walked up to the throne.

Someone must have alerted my father to her arrival, because he burst into the room a few moments later, flanked by guards. Ariel and Margaret were there too. Ophelia was tending the gardens.

“Moya,” my father hissed, “what are you doing here?”

She dragged a finger along the armrest. “Redecorating.”

“Seize her.”

The guards raced towards her, but were sent flying with a wave of her hand. Margaret and Ariel leapt in front of their charge, summoning a shield. Moya picked one of the guards off the floor with her magic, and snapped her spine. Then she went for another.

“I can keep going.”

The shield lowered.

“What do you want, Moya?” my father asked.

She reached his side. “Freedom,” she said, “and everything else my sister has.”

Ariel saw the flash of the dagger before it connected. She leapt forward, but Moya froze her and Margaret in place. Froze their bodies, at least. Their eyes were still moving.

She slid the dagger into my father’s side, and he crumpled to the floor.

Margaret let out a low moan.

It was over in seconds.

“Eila,” he breathed, his fingers trying in vain to staunch the blood, “Eila, I should have liked... to have seen him...”

Moya lowered a hand to his chest, and turned his heart to stone, preventing my mother from casting any of the resurrection spells she would try.

And she would try, all of them. And I would watch.

Just like I watched Moya leaving him, and her magic springing the fairies free, and watched them cry over his lifeless body, sobbing both for him, and my mother.

“The child,” Ariel wept at one point, still stroking back his hair, with more meaning packed into those two words than could possibly be conveyed.

Margaret’s fingers, stained with my father’s blood, clasped Ariel’s over an inert chest. “We’ll take care of him.”



I fall into sleep uneasily, haunted by the memory I never should have witnessed, but my dream is beautiful. I am swimming in the lake, in my true body. I am flesh. My skin feels like silk.

I have had this dream before, but this time I am accompanied by a beautiful intruder. Rose is in the lake too, swimming with more confidence than she has ever shown in life. I am so aware that this is a dream, but I do not care. I want to drown in it.

I glide forward and reach out to touch her. Her skin sears mine, her touch lightning. She smiles at me, warm and rapturous. My insides melt. I long to touch her again, more of her, all of her.

Suddenly, Rose’s smile drops. She shakes her head, skirting backwards in the water.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“This is wrong,” she says bluntly. “This isn’t right.”

It feels more right than anything else in my life. Does she not feel that too? “Why isn’t it?”

“You aren’t... you’re not him.”

“Who?”

“Thorn. I shouldn’t... I shouldn’t be dreaming of you. It isn’t right.”

She doesn’t recognise me. The thought makes me laugh. It is a dream of mine, of course, my desire creates hers. She wants to be here with me, the face she knows. She wants me, no one else.

“Rose,” I say, pulling her towards me. She does not resist. She moulds into me, reassured by my voice, I think. “It’s all right. It’s me.”

She still looks sceptical. “What do you mean?”

“I’m Thorn, silly.” I lean forward in the water, my hands sliding round her back. I stare at her glass-green eyes like I can reach into her soul. “Can’t you see?”

Rose’s eyes widen, as if she suddenly understands. She places a hand against my cheek, and I swear it hums beneath her. My fingers move to wipe back her hair. Before another word can be uttered between us, our mouths slide together and we are kissing.

Her breath explodes into me. Our lips sing. I feel the warmth of her spreading outwards, covering every inch of my skin. We are fire and starlight, weightless and weighty. I am soaring, and still tied to the earth, tied to her.

I want to tell her that I love her, but I do not want to stop kissing her. It doesn’t seem to matter, in the dream. The words burst out of me, surrounding us both.

I love you. Stay with me. I love you.



The next morning, Rose seems a bit distracted. Her hair is all over the place, her cheeks red. When I ask if she’s all right, she rushes her words. Her cheeks get even redder. She tries to blame it on the weather, but I sense there is something else.

I am glad of my fur this morning, else my cheeks might blush too. I wonder what she dreamed of? Her thoughts could not be as beautiful as mine. I can still feel the weight of her on me, in me. The mere sight of her lips makes mine tremble.

I wonder if we kissed in real life, would it feel the same? The remembrance makes me smile, and my tail twitches.

“Did you sleep well, last night?” I ask, struggling to bite down my grin.

Rose stumbles as she slides into her seat. “W-what? Why? Why would you ask that?”

“Your hair is all over the place.”

“Oh!” she furiously pats it down. “I just... I... never mind.”

“You’re very skittish this morning. Are you quite all right? You look flushed —”

“Well, the weather is getting awfully warm!”

She fans herself desperately, colour rushing to her cheeks.

“All right.” I shrug, finally sitting down to eat. My cheeks ache from smiling, and Rose keeps looking at me. She is otherwise quiet, wolfing down her breakfast.

“I’m going to take a bath,” she declares, shooting up abruptly.

“A bath?” It is an odd time of the day for one.

“Yes. A cold one,” she mutters. “For it is so warm.”

“We could go down to the lake—”

“No, no, it’s all right.” She tucks in her chair, and scuttles off without another word. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her so flustered.

“What’s wrong with her?” I ask aloud.

Ariel appears beside me. “I’m on it.” She disappears just as quickly.

With nothing else to do while Rose bathes, I wander into the Hall of Mirrors, avoiding the Mirror of Truth and the Mirror of Fear. The contents of the former remain a mystery to me, and the contents of the latter... I already know, and I do not wish to see. It may come to pass, soon enough.

I have no need to look in the Mirror of Desire. It would only show me her. My desire is flesh and blood and walks beside me, a living ghost, a golden blessing. She haunts me, torments me, calms me.

Not for the first time, I wish I could write. I wish I could press my words into paper, explain them, define them, commit them. I have heard it said that until something is written, it is never truly spoken.

I fall beside the Mirror of the Past, the one I spend the most time with, watching endless memories of long ago, of happier times. But this morning, I am after something more recent, urged by the faint echo of Rose's lips against mine.

How much of it was real, what I imagined when I lay near death?

"Show me Rose trying to save me."

The mirror whirls back to my bedroom. I lie cold and still on the bed, not moving, Rose's face a stark mask of agony and she begs me to drink.

When I do not, she places her mouth on mine.

Something between cold dread and elation churns within me. I cannot believe that she did this, and that I have no clear memory of what it was like. What must it have felt like, to her, all my teeth pressed against her soft, perfect lips?

No wonder she hasn't mentioned it.

Ariel reappears before I've had much time to dwell on what I've just witnessed.

"Is Rose all right?"

"Strange dreams, I think, but she didn't tell me what they were."

"Right."

She pats down my mane. "What did *you* dream of?"

"I... don't remember."

"Ugh. You and Rose. You're both such liars."

I don't know what to say to this. "Rose... Rose kissed me while I was unconscious."

Ariel bobs. "If you call that a kiss, *sure*. To save you."

"How did it work?"

"Who knows? But it did. Maybe because you love her. True love, boy. Can defeat anything, or so they say."

Her tiny form drifts over to the Mirror of Truth, and her face fills the frame, her willowy form as supple as water. I have never looked at her this way, never really looked at her at all: there is no need to examine a face you have known all your life. But I do now. She is young, or looks it, the appearance in human years of someone only twenty; I have always seen her as old, but she looks very young to me now.

"Ariel..." I ask quietly, "have you... have you ever loved someone?"

Ariel tilts her head slightly to the side, her movements stalling slightly. "Yes," she replies, after a pause, "but not enough."

"Not enough for what?"

"To spend forever with."

I suspect that she means more than that, that *enough* holds other things, other things she wouldn't do for this person. She could not commit to them. She could not love them with everything. She could not break a curse for them.

"I have a question," Ariel starts.

“Do you? Because it sounds like a complaint.”

“How come Rose could see us before you? You knew we were there. I know you were looking for us—”

“I don’t know, Ariel,” I say. “You know I *wanted* to see you. Longed for it. Since the day you disappeared. But I... I’d lost all hope. I thought you had become a part of the castle, like my mother. Little more alive than furniture.”

“So you thought you couldn’t see us, and so you couldn’t,” she murmurs. “And Rose is the opposite.”

“Come again?”

“Rose thought she could see us, imagined it possible, and thus she could.”

“What are you thinking, Ariel?”

“I’m wondering what her power is. All the girls had one. Grace could see the future... in her way, at least. I think Rose might be similar. I think she can see what others can’t. What they can be, or should be. Maybe even what they are.”

“That might be true,” I say, a little forlornly. “But then why hasn’t she seen *me*?”

“Who’s to say she hasn’t?”

Because if she has, I wouldn’t still be this way.

“I think she has to say it,” Ariel says, as if reading my mind. “I don’t think it’s enough to just love you, she has to announce it.”

“And what if she never says it? *Because she doesn’t feel it?*”

“Well, then she’s a fool. Wait, that sounded dangerously like affection. Hmm. I better insult you...”

I groan. “Why are you like this?”

She shrugs. “Because you need me to be.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You’ve got Margaret to mother you and Ophelia to be your maiden aunt. You didn’t need another caretaker. You needed someone to be young and silly with you.”

“Like a sister, you mean.”

She nudges my elbow. “You know you wouldn’t have me any other way.”

Margaret and Ophelia drift in not long afterwards. They magic us some pillows and sit beside me, summoning an old story on the mirror. It’s the tale of my great-grandparents, on my father’s side. The same ones that used to tell him fantastic stories. The fairies showed it to me long ago when I was adamant that true love wasn’t a thing and I was going to remain this way forever.

It is possible their story sparked my interest in romance.

The Mirror shows a scene of the two of them walking through a forest, singing together, teasing one another. Their easiness reminds me of Rose and myself in a way that makes me smile and ache.

“Ah, Briar and Leopold,” Ariel swoons. “A sweet story. Shame about what happened at the end.”

I baulk. “What happened at the end?”

“She’s teasing you.” Margaret sighs. “They were very happy together.”

“They were very *boring* together,” Ariel groans. “Literally nothing happened after he rescued her. They got married and had children and reigned in almost perfect peace and prosperity for the rest of their days. Happiness is such a tragedy to the rest of us.”

I blink at her, looking at the other two. “Is she all right?”

“Honestly, dear, we do worry sometimes.”

“They were a lovely couple,” Ophelia croons, ignoring Ariel’s strange remarks. “Leo was a sweetheart.”

“*Such* a sweetheart,” Margaret agrees. “Not like his namesake, your father. He was *wicked*.”

“He was hilarious!” Ariel says. “But yes, Leopold was sweet, I grant you that. You remind me of him a bit, you know. Sensitive boy. Much better at expressing his feelings than you. Only took him a few weeks.”

“Different circumstances, dear.”

“They were both really high stakes!”

Margaret sighs, her expression turning misty as she looks at the will-be lovers, strolling together, not quite touching.

“You were married once, weren’t you, Margaret?” I say.

“Twice, actually. I was very young, the first time. It burnt out as quickly as a flame.”

“How can you love someone and stop loving them?”

“If only we knew the answer to that one!” she scoffed. “Oh, the hearts we would save. I tell you this about my first love: I loved the idea of her more than I loved her. Oh, when we parted, my heart shattered truly enough, but as I picked up those pieces I saw her, and myself, for who we really were. I had painted a picture based on falsehoods, through a lens. My second love, well... it was not as bright or passionate as the first, but earth is stronger than fire. It endures when the flames die out. We were wonderfully, blissfully comfortable together for almost a hundred years.”

“He died.”

“Yes,” she replied stonily. “Moya. One of her earliest attacks.”

“You have a daughter. I never asked... what happened to her?”

“She left the palace, when the Queen opened the gateway, one last time. She did not want to leave, but she had two young children of her own.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I have hope I will see her again one day.”

Many hundreds of years have happened outside our realm. Fairies may live a very long time, but Margaret must know there is a good chance her daughters and grandchildren have grown and died. What she gave up to serve my mother... to look after me. I love her for it and resent her for it at the same time. I am not worthy. This was not worth it.

“Are you all right, dearheart?” Margaret asks, creeping closer.

“I’m fine,” I say. “Just fine.”



The next morning, Rose doesn’t make it down for breakfast. After waiting a long while, I go to her room to check on her. She is not there. Bramble comes scooting out though, desperate for a walk, so I grab myself a piece of toast and head out with him, waiting for Rose to appear. It’s a fine morning, gold and glistening, and I become easily distracted.

It is almost lunchtime, and Rose has yet to appear. I conduct a more thorough investigation, searching her usual haunts until I locate her in the Hall of Mirrors. Her cheeks are stained with silver, but she does not look unhappy.

The Mirror of the Past shimmers into nothing as soon as I step into the room.

“Rose?”

She startles, wheeling round.

“Are you all right?”

“Fine,” she says, quickly dabbing at her cheeks. “Come and sit beside me.”

I do so, trembling slightly at her closeness. I wish I could get used to it. “What are we looking at?”

She turns back towards the mirror. “Show us *my* happiest memories.”

There’s something in the way she says *my* that speaks of something, but before I can wonder about it, a memory from Rose’s childhood flashes before me. Grace, tucking up her children in bed, reading to them. More images flood the screen, her playing with them, walking through the woods, singing to them and telling them stories of long, long ago.

There’s memories without Grace, too. Memories of Rose chasing her brother around the garden with a toy sword, pelting him with wads of mud. Memories of her and her siblings running through the meadow, weaving the long grass into tents, splashing in the stream, squealing with delight.

I watch as Rose tries to teach her younger sister how to read, as she builds snowmen with her siblings in the fields, and comes back home to snuggle down beside the fire, resting her head against Grace’s large belly.

The next memory isn’t for a long time afterward, when a chubby baby takes his first step. Freedom gathers him up in his arms, grinning from ear to ear.

“I proclaim you the greatest baby and the best of all brothers!”

The siblings fall into a pile together.

There are more wonderful moments after that, although they feel fewer and far between. Beautiful days spent in the woods, or singing around a piano. So many spent teaching Beau how to do things.

I am conscious that the mirror doesn’t seem to include any moment of her with this boy she kissed. If he is there—in the back of some party scene, perhaps—neither I nor Rose notices him.

White bursts across the glass, and for a moment, I think we’ve flicked to one of *my* memories; it is the first day we played in the snow. I am watching myself watching Rose.

The mirror shows our birthday, the exchange of presents, the glow in my eyes when she touches me. Can she not see how much I adore her, even back then?

The two of us dancing. Gardening together. Reading together. Fishing. *Being*. Teaching Rose how to climb a tree. Her falling on top of me. Singing in the music room. Us in the rose garden. Us by the lake, Rose snuggled in my arms during the thunderstorm.

So many happy memories with me.

I say nothing until the montage of her life is over, and when I do speak, all I can manage is, “Thank you.”

It is real, true, veritable proof of her affection for me, however minor it might be, it matters. And she shared it with me.

We sit for a long while in silence, barely touching.

“Why did you show those to me?” I say finally.

“I needed something good after...” Her expression glazes with darkness. “The fairies showed me what happened here. Between the fairy queen and... and her sister.”

“Oh.”

“I can’t ever imagine hating Hope or Honour like that. Not even Freedom. I don’t *want* to imagine it.” She shivers, and I offer her my arm. She buries herself into it. “I... I asked the mirrors to show me your happiest memories first. I... I hope you don’t mind. You said that the mirrors wouldn’t show me anything that—”

“I don’t mind,” I tell her. “But... why mine?”

Rose looks down. "I... wanted to know you a little better," she admits. "Silly, isn't it? I feel like I already know all the important parts of you. But... well. There it is. It seemed only right I show you my own after that."

"I see."

Rose sighs. "So few happy memories, Thorn."

Somehow, my hand finds its way to hers. "It's all right," I tell her. "You're here now."



Days afterwards, I wonder if that was a cruel thing for me to say, if it placed too much pressure on her to stay out of some sense of obligation. But at the time, I truly meant it. I would endure everything twice over just to know her.

Just to know her. Nothing more.

Love is a foolish thing.

We settle on a new date for our ball: three week's time, a few days after the next full moon. I would be lying if I said I wasn't worried about what Moya might have in store for her this time, but the fairies assure me that an attack of that magnitude was likely to have depleted her.

"She was desperate," Margaret concludes.

"Why?" I wonder.

"I imagine she suspected the curse was close to being broken."

I swallow nervously, imaging what might have given her that impression, especially as Rose was to leave a few days later. Maybe she knew I was going to confess, and didn't want to give any opportunity of my suit being returned.

The ball is a welcome distraction, both for ourselves, and our fairy companions, who absolutely forbid us from helping in any way, shape or form. I take Rose back to the lake and we continue our climbing and swimming lessons. Inspired by our previous success, I decide to take up painting, gifting Rose with each of my endeavours although I'm fairly sure she's doing it out of politeness.

"I'm running out of space!" she declares eventually. "May I suggest you turn your attention to calligraphy?"

I prickle at the thought of this, aware of how painfully clumsy my handwriting is, how long it takes me to craft anything like a sentence. But Rose could ask me to fly and I'd probably give it a go.

My resolve melts after a few nights of practising my letters and still having little more than a few, untidy scrawls to show for it. Nothing looks like I want it to. One evening, I pick up my paper, crush it into as much of a ball shape as I can manage, and hurl it towards the fireplace. It falls a little short.

"This is hopeless!" I cry.

Rose hurries over, pulling the ink bottle out of reach. "You're doing fi—"

"I'm not, Rose!" I thump my hands against the table. "These ridiculous paws—nobody can write with them!"

Rose takes my hand and imprisons it in hers. She holds it there until I look at her, sensing she will not move until I do. That's reason enough to stay still. "I love these hands," she says, and her words reach me more softly than her touch, every syllable a caress she cannot mean. "They are by far the most gentle that I have ever held."

Everything in me softens, and I want to beg her to speak again, not caring if they're lies sent to soothe me. *Give me more lies, beautiful goddess.*

“Thorn,” Rose continues, her voice tight, as if her words are difficult, “when the gate opens, and I go home again... would you come with me?”

The breath stills in my throat. What does she mean by asking me this? No one has ever, ever asked me this. It’s ludicrous. Absurd. She can’t mean it.

Then why ask?

It may be the first time I have ever refused her. “No, Rose, I cannot.” I tear my hand away from her, the loss of it aching. I cannot look at her face. I get up, moving closer to the window.

“But why not?” Her voice sounds pained.

“Well, I admit I know little of the outside world, but I am sure I am right in guessing that it knows little of magic, and thus might be a little hard to explain... me.” I gesture to my body.

“I wouldn’t mind explaining,” she says gently.

“I would,” I respond, almost as quietly. “That’s even if I lived long enough for you to begin explaining.”

“Don’t talk like that.”

“You know it’s the truth. The outside world is not a place for me. They would kill me or put me in a cage... one much smaller than this.”

A coldness settles in the air between us. I can feel Rose staring at me still. I think, for the first time, I want her to leave. I don’t know what to say to her.

I would come with you if I could. I would follow you anywhere, but there is only death there.

Unless you release me. Release me. Please. Only you can.

But she won’t. Or she can’t.

“I... I’m not sure, if I go back, and I never see you again,” Rose continues, “that I will ever be... truly happy again.”

For some reason, her words don’t soften me. I manage a hard snort. *But you don’t feel like I feel. You never have. I don’t think you ever will.* “A touch dramatic, I fear.”

“Will you be happy, without me?”

Of course not. I barely knew the meaning of the word until I knew you.

“No,” I say, “but that is because I will be alone. You shall have your family to distract you from any immediate loneliness, and I’ve no doubt, after some time, you shall move on from this experience.”

Now it is Rose’s turn to laugh. “Move on? How can you think such a thing?”

“All the others did.”

“Well, I’m not all the others, am I?”

“No,” I say sadly, “you certainly aren’t.”

I almost wish you were, so you could not hurt me this way.

“Why am I so different?”

Because I love you.

Does she honestly not know? Does she not think I could possibly answer that question?

It takes me an age to speak, to find something that isn’t a lie but isn’t so much the truth that the next words she utters could destroy me. “You always treated me like a person,” I tell her, “and then, very quickly, like a friend.”

Rose frowns, as if she knows I’m not being entirely honest. “My mother did the same,” she says, “and you said one or two others you might have called friends. I am more than a friend, whatever we are. Why?”

I feel like my own silence is deafening. “I do not know,” I manage. “I wish I did. Perhaps then, it might be easier to explain while I shall not move on, but expect

you will. I never... I never knew what it was like, to truly be myself with another person, until I knew you, and your soul slipped so easily into mine that I so quickly forgot what life without you was like. If only it were so easily expressed, if I could squeeze it into numbers rather than words. If it were logical, rather than akin to madness. You *are* more than a friend. You are more myself than I am.”

Without saying the words, I cannot find a better way to confess them. I wait for her to understand, to say something, anything back. To crush me, to express some thin sliver of the same sentiment.

She does neither.

“I’m going to come back,” she tells him, “on the next solstice.”

I exhale deeply. *Damn this woman.* “It won’t be enough, Rose.”

“Enough for what?”

“Either of us. I don’t think I could bear to see you only for a few hours every year. The rest of my existence would be suspended, waiting for those few moments. I would be like an unfurled flower, all year long, waiting for those few moments in the sunlight with you. I don’t... I don’t presume to imagine your feelings, but... you will have a life outside of this place, a life that shouldn’t be held back by a promise you made to me, when you were lonely and had no one else.”

I cannot read Rose’s expression. I cannot chip away at the adamant of her mind.

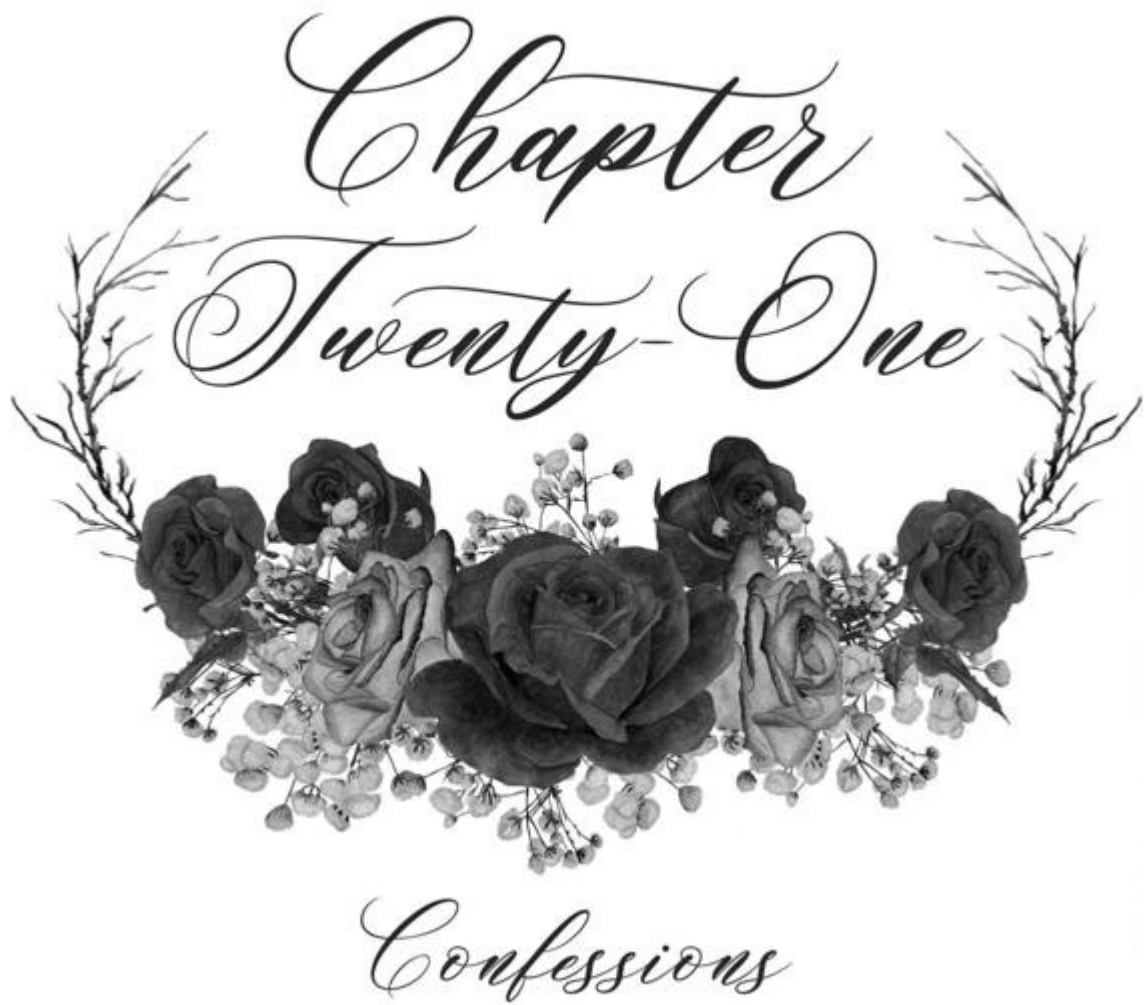
But I have nothing else to say.

Rose moves towards the door, her fingers clasping around the handle. I wait for her to slip away without another word.

If she says ‘goodbye’ it will feel like forever.

But she does not say that. Once more surprising me, once more holding me above the pit of despair on a thin string of hope, she says, “I was always lonely, until I met you.”

Chapter Twenty-One



Confessions

Her words haunt me long into the night, offering some frenzied remnant of a hope I'd felt waning. It was hard to imagine her ever being lonely. I'd seen her with her siblings.

Perhaps she'd just been so long without them she'd forgotten what it was like.

Perhaps we're just excellent friends.

Perhaps I've forgotten what other company is like, too.

But I have been lonely for her my entire life.

I have another dream of her. I am lying in my room, late at night, tossing and turning, when there is a quiet, almost indiscernible knock at the door. I raise my head just in time to see Rose creeping in. I try to say her name, but before I can, she has crossed the room and placed her lips over mine.

She says nothing as my heart explodes in my chest.

This is wrong, says a voice in my head. *She shouldn't kiss you this way. Not like you are—*

I raised my hands to her shoulders, to push her away, or to pull her closer, I do not know. But when my fur touches her flesh, it unravels. Skin presses to the surface, slides across hers like sparks on flint. Rose's hands move up my body, and

shed my former self. Then she reaches my face and breaks away, her face beaming.

"There you are," she smiles rapturously, and then kisses me again, as if nothing else in the world matters.

I gather her close to me and drink her, savour her, kiss her back. Unashamed, unreservedly. Why had I ever been afraid of doing this? Why had I ever doubted that underneath, we were exactly the same? Her soul splits into mine and every secret she has ever kept unravels. Her thoughts taste like buttermilk as they swirl around my mind.

When I wake, I want to scream with the unbearable frustration of wanting her. It's like some festering wound, deep inside me.

I half-wish I'd just let Moya kill me. Dying in Rose's arms is better than living out of them.



The weight of the words that passed between us is ignored when dawn comes around, but I feel them thickening in the air between us. We fall back into our routine and pretend I never confessed what I did, and that Rose never uttered her response... whatever it meant. We skirt around each other, avoiding all serious talk.

I meet Ariel on my way to breakfast one morning. Truth be told, I've been avoiding her too. This is difficult when she can crackle in and out of existence at the drop of a hat, but I have had years of training in this regard and have perfected the art of acting distracted whenever she appears.

"Good morning," she says tartly. "Told Rose you love her, yet?"

I glare at her. "No, because I don't know that she feels the same."

"Pretty words she said the other night."

"She's lonely. She's confused."

Ariel sighs. "You two are killing me."

"Not as much as it will kill me, I'm sure."

A pause stresses out between the two of them. "I'm sorry," says Ariel, unusually seriously. "I didn't mean—"

"I know, Ariel."

"Can you... can you feel it? Your heart?"

My chest feels tight just thinking about it. I have no way of knowing what a normal, human heart feels like. No way of knowing if it hurts in the same way. "No. Yes. Sometimes."

"I don't think she's as fey as some of the others, you know. She doesn't seem to feel her heart at all."

"She was fey enough to bring the castle back to life."

Ariel pauses.

"Ariel?"

"I think," she says carefully, "that we might have to accept the possibility that it may not have been her, not completely."

"What do you mean?"

"You are fey as well."

I exhale slowly, hope sidling away from me. "You think it might not be her at all."

"I am certain that she cares for you."

"But not enough."

Something rips away from me, and Ariel must see it in my face.

“There’s no way of knowing—” she adds hastily, “not until you tell her! Because I really think she might feel the same, but I also think it’s impossible that someone as mortal as her should have been able to do *this much*. I think it’s more likely to be you. Think about it. Everything dried up when you lost yourself to hopelessness before.”

I don’t want to believe her. I don’t want to believe it’s me. I want to believe that it’s her, or us, bringing life back to this place.

But... but when I think about it... the snow melted when I started to care for her.

The room spins for a moment.

“Thorn?” Ariel hovers beside me.

“I’m all right.”

“You’re not,” she says, “you’re dying a slow death. So grasp at light and talk to her. *Please!*”

She vanishes as soon as she’s said her piece, and I stumble along to the parlour. Rose is already there, playing with Bramble, kissing the top of his head.

Is Ariel right? Should I just rip off the bandage, let the wound bleed how it may?

But then Rose smiles at me, and I do not want to die today.

“Little creature gets more kisses than I do,” I say teasingly, dropping down on the chaise.

“Don’t grumble,” Rose says, her voice bright. “You sound like my father.”

“I am quite sure I do not wish to sound like your father. I am equally sure I would wish for a few more of your kisses.” *And so much more.*

Rose drops her hands away from Bramble, throwing a nearby pillow at me. I snatch it out of the air and throw it back to her, but she seizes it again, falls into my lap, and hits me squarely in the face.

She’s had pillow fights with her brothers and sisters before. It doesn’t mean anything.

Rose relaxes, and she leans forward to kiss my forehead, and both of my cheeks.

Because I asked her to.

The pillow falls from her fingers, and she stares at me. I stare back, wanting her to kiss me, terrified that she will.

Not like this. Not like this, please.

She slides her fingers to my lips, and presses our noses together instead.

It is almost enough.

Almost.



Rose is in a curious, light mood the following day. I do not question it until dinner time.

“I couldn’t sleep last night,” she admits, “so I went to watch my parents in the mirrors. To watch them... falling in love.”

My heart skips a beat, but I try to control it. I watched my parents courtship long before I fell in love, when such an idea was just a ghost to me.

“I didn’t realise they didn’t like each other at first,” she carries on. “Papa was so besotted with Mama, it seemed inconceivable to imagine it hadn’t always been that way.”

“And your mother,” I ask, “was she besotted with your father?”

“Yes,” I say slowly, “but not quite in the same way. You could see the devotion pouring out of Papa in every glance he gave her. Mama was more subtle in her affections towards him. She showed her affections in what she did, not what she said. No wonder he looked so nervous when he proposed!” She smiles fondly at this remembrance. “Have you ever looked at your parents’ lives?”

I nod.

“What were they like?”

“Oh, utterly besotted. It quite poured out of them as well.”

In ten years, it never seemed to change. It might have, if they had had longer. Such is the nature of life.

I wonder if I would ever be anything other than besotted with Rose. How I long for and dread the idea.

“Do you miss them?” Rose asks.

I contemplate this for a long while. “It is difficult to miss a person you never met,” I say eventually. “But yes, I do. I cannot hope but imagine what my father was like, what we would have been like, how different my life might have been if he had lived. My mother... yes, I miss her. I feel her presence, and her absence, almost every day.”

Rose’s eyes glitter, and for a moment, she is quiet. “I felt Mama’s absence so keenly for so long. I was so angry that she wasn’t here with us. I was angry at the rest of my family when they looked happy without her. That feeling faded, in time. I was less angry when people started talking about her again. It was like she was still there.” She looks up at me. “Do the fairies remember your parents?”

I smile. “Yes, and I must admit, it is good to have someone who knows them, back in my life.”

“I should like to know them.”

If I show them to her, she will know it in a second. Any faint fragment of hope she could love me like this would be extinguished. “And I should like to show them to you, one day.”

“But not yet?”

“No, not yet, Rose. Someday, I hope.”

Someday, someday, please.

But even though we have another five months together, I still feel like we are running out of time.



A few days before the full moon, we sit together in the library. Bramble is at Rose’s feet, basking in the warm glow of the embers. It is getting late, but neither of us are in the mood for sleep just yet. I am reading a story aloud, trying not to enjoy the rapt look in her glistening eyes too much.

I reach the end, half-tempted to continue it, just so she can continue to gaze at me that way. “*And their happiness, as it was founded on virtue, was complete.*” I sigh. “Another happy ending. I’m glad.”

Rose laughs, her eyes not leaving my face.

“You are smiling at me, Rose.”

“That is because you are very sweet.”

“They deserved their happy ending,” I say testily, not sure I care for the casual quality of her tone, “after everything they’ve been through—”

“I am not disputing that in the slightest.”

“Oh. Excellent. For a moment, I thought you were teasing me.”

"Whenever I say you are sweet, I am not teasing you." She reaches up and tugs my ear. "Other times, however—"

"Oh, Rose!" I pull her hand away, but then hold it, my thumb gently caressing her palm. "Rose..."

Words fail me at that point. I want to peel myself out of my skin and feel her really, truly, for the first time. I am going to break with wanting her.

"You say my name a lot, do you realise?" she says.

"Do I? I didn't realise. I suppose I just like the way it sounds."

"So do I." Her cheeks redden. "On your lips."

She scrambles away from me, towards the desk beside the window, fanning herself. It really is too hot. The fairies have made the fire as low and cool as possible while still giving off light, but it's far too much. I don't blame her for wanting to sink into the cool night air.

Her hands fall to one of the papers on the desk. My heart flips. It's a poem I've been composing in my shoddy, shaken handwriting.

"What's this?" she asks, holding it up.

I rush to my feet, my tail twitching nervously. "Ah, that, yes, um, no—"

Rose starts to read. "*Like flames, my heart has flickered, felt before—*"

"It's just a work in progress—" I try to snatch it from her, but she dives under my arm, darting to the other side of the room.

*"Yet never till those eyes held mine
Did it move, and beat, like unfurling wings
To fall in rhythm with each breath she took.
O, that I have lived to feel such joy,
And weather each hard pain it brings.
Endure her closeness, heart I beg thee,
For each step she takes from me is hell,
And each moment with her bliss, heaven-kissed.
Such sweetness turns my withered heart to spring.
Whenever I should die, cut it from my chest
It lies there in my breast, my heart, rose-shaped."*

Rose's voice trails off towards the end, her eyes staying on the page for a long, long while, before finally circling up towards mine. She does not break away. It is as if our gazes have been threaded together. In the fireplace behind me, a log collapses. It is the only sound in the room. Neither of us speaks.

"It's just a... writing exercise," I say eventually, my voice low and soft, "A silly thing—"

"It was beautiful," Rose breathes, as if the word doesn't do it justice. "Where... where did those words come from? How... how long did that take you —"

"It was just there..." I reply. "Written. In the space between..."

"The space between?"

I step closer. "In the space between. In the only between that matters."

The clock on the wall chimes two. Two? Rose glances up, shocked. "Good lord, it's late!" she laughs. "What would my Nanny say? Up until two with a man after dark... I do hope he declares his intentions!"

I open my mouth. It hangs there for a while, unspeaking, frozen. It is ludicrous, impossible, the words that come out of it next. Perhaps they too came from the *space between*, or maybe they were dragged into existence by the crumb of hope she threw at me by talking about *intentions*.

The merest, sliver of proof that she sees me as a man, as a suitor.

“Will you marry me, Rose?”

Rose stills, and while I feel a long breath of a moment, I am equally certain her reply comes with absolutely no hesitation at all. “What?”

She stares at me like she’s misheard, like she’s waiting for me to say something else, or snatch it back. I have never seen her look so *shocked*.

“Forgive me,” I say, wrenching out the words, “That just... slipped out. But... I should like an answer. Yes or no, without fear.” *No turning back now.*

Rose smiles, but it is a faint one. “As if I could ever fear you, dearest.”

Tendrils of hope stroke against my insides. “Is that a—”

“No, Thorn.”

My heart falls. She didn’t even think about it.

“For a start,” she continues breezily, as if she has no idea she holds my heart in her hands, “there is no priest to marry us, and what would my family say, if I did not invite them to the wedding? I do like to do things properly.”

It’s so silly, but it was actually the perfect thing to say. She’s not rejecting the offer outright—not rejecting *me* outright—but rather the impracticalities of it.

I laugh. I cannot help it.

Rose raises an eyebrow. “What amuses you so?”

“Your answer. I have never imagined such a pleasant rejection.”

“I am sorry it was a rejection.”

“Do not be sorry,” I tell her, almost believing it. “Goodnight, Rose.”

“Goodnight, Thorn.”



I make it to my room and slither into the seat beside the desk, dropping my face into my hands. Three short cracks sound seconds later, but I do not look up.

“You asked her to marry you,” says Margaret, almost tonelessly.

My mortification returns, in full force. I feel as if I’ve been hit by a carriage. Heat swells within me.

“I know. What was I thinking?” I meant to say, *I love you, stay with me*, but somehow, I rushed right ahead to *marry me*. What *was* I thinking?

“It’s not what I would have led with,” Ariel says, as tactfully as she can manage. “I liked the poem. I think you could have been more explicit.”

I bang my head against the desk.

“What *are* you doing?” Margaret shrieks. “That is mahogany!”

“I’m trying to knock myself unconscious so I no longer have to look Rose in the eye after asking her to *marry me*.”

“Yes, that did rather come out of the blue,” Margaret says.

“Not helpful!” I look up at the three of them. I wish I could see their faces, read their thoughts. Then again, I see Rose’s all the time and I barely know what’s going on in there. How can I know someone so well and yet have no idea what she’s thinking? “Do you think she knows?”

“Knows what?” they ask.

“That I’m madly, ridiculously, overly, irrevocably, undeniably... you know.”

“In love with her?”

“Yes.”

“I think she’s a fool if she doesn’t,” Margaret says promptly. “But then the human heart... and Rose is, bless her, not particularly... in tune, shall we say, with her emotions.”

"The girl would literally rather wrestle a wolf than confront her feelings," adds Ariel.

"So she doesn't know?"

"I don't know!"

I return to banging my head against the desk. It seems more productive. "I don't know how to make it more obvious!"

"Here's an idea: *you tell her.*"

"What, I just go to her room, right now, and yell, 'Rose, I love you' in her face?"

"Well, I wouldn't yell it..."

"I can't do it now! I have to pick the right moment—"

"Dear boy, you have had so many, it's frankly embarrassing."

"I can't do this."

"You'll have to, if you ever hope to be human again."

"I don't care about that." I say it without thinking, but my words hang in the air for a while. *I don't care about being human again.* I don't care about... about everything I thought I cared about. "I just want to be with her."

"You really feel that way?" Margaret asks. "You would be happy to remain as you are?"

"Yes," I reply slowly. I hardly know it until I say it. "I don't... I don't mind being like this. It has disadvantages, to be sure, but so does every body I suppose."

"What changed?"

"I saw her," I whisper, and remember a moment, what feels like so long ago, when she smiled at me for the first time, and sunlight seemed to spill out of her. "And she saw me. I care nothing for what I look like any more. Not if I am with her. Not if she is happy."

All three fairies fall silent for a moment. It is a loud, shocked, thoughtful, invasive silence.

"Don't you want to... you know..." Ariel starts, "Make the beast with two backs, if you'll pardon the pun?"

I narrow my eyes at her. "Whilst that would be preferable," I concur, glad of my lack of red cheeks, and the fact she does not know my dreams, "and indeed desirable... it is not essential to my happiness, if it is not essential to hers."

I can live without carnal love, something I have only ever imagined. I cannot live without her. And not just because of the curse. A normal, mortal feeling clutches me. I simply cannot live without her, now that my soul has known the shape of hers.

Margaret sighs with the weight of a thousand thoughts, none of which she voices. "Oh, my dear boy," she says instead, fluttering around my face. "I'm going to bring you some tea. Ophelia, run a bath, I think. Ariel—"

"I'm going to check on Rose," she declares. "Back in a tick."

She vanishes, leaving me alone with Ophelia. She turns on the taps, filling a quiet corner of the room with steam. I'm in no mood for heat, but I know that sleep will avoid me. I lower myself into the tub obediently, not caring that it isn't ready.

"Why do you love her?" asks Ophelia, humming by my side. "Why her, and none of the others?"

I pause for so long on the answer that I imagine Ophelia believes I have no intention of replying. It should be an easy question to answer—and perhaps it is—but there is so much more to it than, "I simply do."

There is no *simply* about it, despite how easily I fell for her.

I liked her when she laughed, when she smiled, when she cried, when little parts of her soul spluttered to surface. I liked seeing who she really was, because the more I unravelled, the more I felt revealed, too. The more she showed, the more I felt her pressing into me, until who I was and who she was became almost one indivisible being.

For all that I cannot always read her, I know her shape; I know the person she is. I know I love whatever is hidden between the uncovered pages of that tome. She is far from an open book, but every page I decipher I love more than the last. I want to reread and read on in equal desperation to know more, to understand better, to discover. She is a kind person. She likes solace, but is sure of herself. She dreams deeply, and disappears into a new world as thoroughly as I do every time she reads. There is something in our shared wonder of a tale that connects us, threads of woven gold in long-forgotten volume.

"Because she is inside of me," I tell Ophelia. "Because whatever I am clings to her. I feel like I did not know myself until I knew Rose, and now whatever I've become cannot untangle itself from the snare of her soul."

Ariel returns. I sit up sharply.

"Well?"

"Rose is doing a very good job of pretending to be asleep, so nothing to report."

She drops down on the bed, and I imagine her spread out there like she once was when she had a body, limbs sprawled everywhere.

I sink under the water and wish I could drown myself. "What am I going to say to her tomorrow?"

"I suggest—"

"I don't want to hear it."

"Then why ask? You already know what you should do."

I do, but taking back words and replacing them with the ones I should have spoken is no simple task, and fills me full of quiet dread.

Part Four

Autumn



Chapter Twenty-Two



The Mirror of Truth

Needless to say, I abandon all thoughts of telling her what I meant to say—and all thought entirely—when she smiles brightly at me the following morning and we slide back into our old routine. I keep waiting for her to say something, to clear the air, or even tease me over the ridiculousness of my words, but she says absolutely nothing.

Nothing. Almost all day.

And the day after.

And the day after that, too.

She is bright and cheerful, but the conversation is flat and insipid, like lukewarm tea. We converse about the weather, we report factually what is happening in the books we are engrossed in. We compliment the food, the flowers, the gardens. Not a personal word is uttered.

She barely even speaks my name, and I mourn the sound of it.

The night of the full moon comes. I'm surprised to hear that Rose will be coming with me to the cells, especially given the distance between us for the past few days, but I can't deny I'm pleased. I'm loath to subject her to any kind of unpleasantness, but I still want her beside me. I want her to *want* to be beside me.

We go down to the dungeon early, Bramble and the fairies in tow, hoping to avoid the disaster that befell us last month. I panic suddenly at the last minute and ask her to stay behind.

“No,” she says simply, and marches on ahead.

“But—”

“Yes, yes, you’ll fret and you’ll worry, and you don’t want anything to happen to me—”

Putting it mildly.

“But it’s no easier for me, you know.”

It is.

“Bramble and the fairies will watch out for me.”

“If she somehow sets me loose again—”

Rose gestures to a nearby sword. “I’ll run you through without a second’s thought. Promise.”

I stare at her.

“Well, maybe I’ll pause a *little*. And I’ll be very cut up about it.”

She digs me in the ribs and hurries on ahead, chasing Bramble through the gardens. This girl. Why is it so hard to know how she feels?

Our walk down is thankfully peaceful, but moonrise is still a short while away. I try not to think about her making her way back without me.

There is no need to lock me immediately, so we sit in the lighted corridor, playing games to alleviate the tension. The fairies entertain Rose with stories of their lives at court, and a few embarrassing tales of my childhood.

“Really?” Rose grins. “Utterly naked?”

“As the day he was born.”

“Please,” I beg, rubbing the back of my neck, “no more.”

When the hour approaches, the fairies vanish, promising to return to escort Rose back to the castle. I do not need another witness, and, as almost always, I am keen to be alone with her. Only Bramble stays by her side as I climb into the cell.

“I haven’t seen a shadow in a while,” Rose tells me.

“Me neither,” I admit. “Not since the last full moon. I wonder what changed?”

I feel like a lot has changed since then, but I don’t have the words or the courage to explain it.

Rose turns around as I shed my clothes. We sit together in the silence for a little while, our backs to each other. We still have a few minutes.

“Rose, if you could... if you could go back now—or today, or tomorrow—would you?” I need to know I’m not being utterly selfish keeping her here, that there’s a part of her that wants it.

She pauses. “But I can’t go back.”

“If you could. Would you go back?”

“I... I have to see them again,” she tells me. “They have to know that I’m all right. And I miss them. I miss them *so much*.”

She swallows, giving apt time for the guilt to eat away at me. Of course, my reasons are not *entirely* selfish; opening the gate by force could weaken the barrier holding Moya, or cost the castle its magic once more. It could lose me the fairies again.

But am I really doing this for them?

“I would not go home tomorrow,” Rose says, with strange finality.

I tense, prickles of pain darting through me. “Why not?” I ask, breathing through it.

“I’m not done here. I’ve still got to break the curse, remember?”

I snort. "Is that all?"

"No," she replies, and I wonder at what she does not say.

My body pulses. Rose turns, her hands rubbing the back of my neck. Beautiful, foolish, wonderful creature. I cannot stop myself from pressing my head against hers.

"Why... why do you want to stay?" I ask her.

"I told you before: I don't want to leave you."

I almost smile. "You didn't say that before."

"Didn't I?"

"No. You... you implied... you... needed to... not... wanted."

"They're the same thing, where you're concerned."

She wants me. Nobody has ever really wanted me before, save my mother, and mothers do not count, not like this. *She wants me, she doesn't want to leave me.*

I feel something cool and wet on my face, and that is the last thing I feel.



I once asked the fairies why they chose to stay, why, when my mother ordered the rest of the court to depart to keep them safe, they vowed instead to stay.

Margaret stayed because she loved my mother, loved her people, and genuinely believed this was the best chance for the realm, that everything could be restored once the curse was broken. Ophelia stayed because of the gardens, because she had no family left outside of them. Ariel... I have never been sure of Ariel's reasons. She told me once that it felt like giving up, deserting the place, and that the castle was her home. She did not want to give Moya the satisfaction of leaving it... but I don't think Moya would have cared, one way or another. They barely knew one another.

I wonder why Rose chose to stay.

For some reason, this is the thought that tumbles through my mind as I tread the place between waking and sleeping on the hard stone floor of the dungeon.

A blanket, a steaming bowl of water from the fountain, and two of the fairies are there when I wake.

"Is Rose—" I shuffle upright, wincing. I've scratched myself up a bit. Ophelia starts dabbing at the wounds. They're light and heal almost immediately.

"Still asleep," Margaret says. "She didn't sleep well either."

She arrives not long after with Ariel, panting and out of breath, looking like some strange mix between exhausted and embarrassed. She takes over from Ophelia and we trudge back to the castle together. I try to eat breakfast, but I'm wiped out. She sends me off to bed.

Ariel tucks me in like I'm a child, pulling the covers up to my chin. "Want me to read you a bedtime story?" I can hear grinning.

"I'll be fine."

"Pfft. You'd let Rose read you a story." She hovers nearby. "Do... do you want me to fetch her for you?"

"No," I say quietly, meaning it but also not.

"I see. But you want her to come anyway?"

I pause. "Yes."

I want her to come. I just don't want to ask for her.

Ariel starts to disappear, but I call her back. "Ariel?"

"Yes?"

"Why did you stay? When everyone else left?"

Ariel freezes. "You don't know?"

"You told me that you—"

"I stayed because I loved you, you silly fool. You didn't know?"

"You never said anything."

"That's because I'm practically your sister. I don't need to tell you, you should just know." She brushes against my forehead, glowing softly, like the kiss of a feather. "Rest up, lovable fool."

I fall into a strange, heavy half-sleep, waking sometime later when the door creeps open. Rose is standing by the door.

"Rose?"

"Ssh..."

She tiptoes across the room, pulling herself up on the bed and sliding under the coverlet. I'm half convinced I'm still dreaming, even when our knees knock together. She places her hand on my cheek and thumbs my lip. Definitely a dream.

"Don't say anything."

What could I say?

She bends her back into the hollow of my torso, and lays her head against my arm.

"Are you comfortable, with me like this?"

I can only nod, lying my head down on the pillow next to her, brushing back her hair.

If this is a dream, don't let me wake up.

I pull the covers up to my shoulders, draping my arm around her middle, unsure of where to put myself. Rose grabs it securely, wrapping it tightly in her own, and clutches it to her chest.

I think she might be crying, but I'm not sure, and don't want to risk her running away. She has come for quiet. She swallows almost audibly, kisses my hand, and wriggles more firmly against me. It takes me a long while to relax after that, but finally I drift off into sleep.



When I wake, I am alone, half-convinced I dreamed such a thing. I do not see her for the rest of the day, and do not seek her out, in case she's ashamed of what transpired.

The next morning, something is wrong. I do not know what, but something is amiss. She's become something like the Rose she was when she first came here, the one wrapped up in grief and anger. If she speaks at all, her voice sounds like an echo.

The silence continues throughout the day, growing colder and stonier. She doesn't even seem to be reading the book in her lap.

"Are you angry with me?" I ask, wondering if I did or said something the day before I can't remember, or when I was transforming.

"No, not you," she replies, her voice softening slightly.

"Then... you?"

"It isn't that simple."

"Could you try to explain it?"

"No."

I fall silent for a while. "Do you... are you missing your family?"

There is a long pause before she replies.

"Yes," she says, her voice cold, "yes, I miss them."

I don't know what else to say, or what to do. Did she crawl into bed with me yesterday seeking physical comfort, and found it lacking? Did she turn to me for want of anyone else?

Rose puts down her book and picks up the next one in the pile. I recognise the cover. One of Grace's favourites. A tragic romance.

Rose stares at it for a long, long time, thumbing through the papers as though hoping to see something different.

She snaps the book closed with the ruthlessness of a wolf devouring its prey, and throws it on the fire. The pages blacken in seconds, edges curling, flames tightening around the cover.

I leap off my seat. "Rose! What are you doing?"

Rose stares at the title as it is licked away by the flames. "It's a bad book," she says coldly. "I didn't like the ending."

Then she turns away and rushes upstairs. What is wrong with her?

How can I help her?

How can I help myself?



I drag myself back to my room, stopping myself from checking in on Rose, and slump down on the bed. Margaret and Ophelia appear with tea, but I have no appetite for it. I keep thinking of the book in the fire, how Rose could just throw it away like that when she loves books so much. What was it about the tale that upset her so?

Or was it something else? Some other fury that drove her to destruction? I toiter on the edge of that feeling myself.

Ariel comes buzzing into my room. "Developments!" she shrieks. "Serious ones!"

I leap off the bed and bound towards her. Margaret and Ophelia materialise bedside me.

"Rose?"

"It's *always* Rose," she groans, rolling her form in lieu of her eyes. "Nothing else happens here. Literally nothing."

"What did she say—"

"I told her that all it would take to end all of this... *melodrama*... would be three little words..."

My heart thuds. "You didn't."

"I did. And that's not the important part. The important thing is she told me that *it would never just be three*."

I pause, waiting for her to continue. "Well?" I urge.

"Well, that's it, isn't it? That's her admitting it."

"Hmm, it doesn't *sound* like an admission," Ophelia admits woefully.

"But... it *was*," Ariel insists. "She's saying there's more to say! *More* than 'I love you'. Not less."

"Did she... did she say anything else?"

"Well..." Ariel hops about.

"Ariel..."

"She may have suggested that saying something along those lines wouldn't solve everything."

I groan inwardly, and turn back towards the bed. She may be right. It may not solve anything at all. And then where would we be?

It also wouldn't solve everything if she didn't mean them.

"Anything else?" whispers Ophelia.

"With some pushing, she did admit that the biological differences between the two of them were... 'potentially problematic'."

My stomach coils with dread. "Oh no..."

"But that's *good*. It means she's been thinking about it!"

"But surely that also means she's not willing to..." Margaret searches for the right word, "commit."

"What else?" I murmur.

Ariel sighs. "She says she can't choose between you and her family, but she thinks she has to."

She does, in the end. Is that what is holding her back? If only I could tell her, if only I knew for certain... love me, and you will have both. I would never make you choose—

Maybe I will have to.

"She said she could not choose between two parts of herself," Ariel whispers.

"Two parts of *herself*. Can you not hear, Thorn, what you are to her?"

But am I enough?

"You don't seem pleased," Ariel continues. "I'm telling you, she loves you! Just tell her and you'll see—"

But if I'm wrong, I'll die.

And she has reservations.

And I can't let her know she killed me.

Yet I want her so much I think I might die of that alone.

"I'm going for a walk," I tell them. "I need to clear my head."

I wander down to the lake. The thin shard of moonlight cuts across the surface of the water, and a spray of crystalline stars coats the skies. Beautiful. Haunting.

"Talk to me," I pray to her, "let me know what it is you truly want. I will give it to you. No matter the cost."



Rose continues to drift about like a phantom, spending hours shut up in her room with Bramble, emerging only at meal times. She avoids being alone with me, inventing tasks that need her attention if the fairies ever try to leave us unaccompanied.

She walks a lot around the gardens. They've suddenly grown cold, a chill rustling in the air. The leaves are beginning to brown, the flowers are drying, wilting. Our perpetual summer has at last come to an end.

Autumn is upon us. The garden is dying, and I feel my hope withering with it. Is it Rose that is doing it? What does it mean?

I catch her staring at the trees.

"What are you thinking of?" I ask her.

"I am thinking that all things have their time," she replies. "And that everything must die."



That night, I go to the Hall of Mirrors. Initially, I go to see Mother. I go to see some memory of a better time. But instead I find my gaze drifting to the Mirror of

Desire.

And there she is, desire made flesh, Rose in the glass, half undressed, her arms tangled up in mine, and I am human, and beautiful too, and her eyes are glassy with longing when she looks at me.

She will never look at me that way.

I stagger backward, reeling from a sickness deep inside, and fall into the sharp gaze of the Mirror of Truth.

Seeing myself in the Mirror of Desire was one thing, when it was a desire, something not real. Seeing me in this is another.

There I am. Finally. I see who I truly am.

A man. Nothing beautiful like Rose implied. An average, ordinary man. Dark-haired, like my fur. A straight nose, fine cheekbones.

A human. I am a human.

And yet I will never be one, because she is never going to set me free.

It's as much of a fantasy as the Mirror of Desire.

I think of the book blackening in the fireplace, the need to scrub out things you can't control. I have no book to burn.

But I hurl a chair into the image and scream as if the change is upon me.

The mirror shatters in an instant. Glass coats the floor, shimmering like stardust. I pick up the chair again and crash it against the remaining pieces, letting the shards slide to the ground, frost in sunlight.

"Thorn!" Rose appears in the door. "What are you doing?"

I carry on as if I cannot hear. She is a ghost, after all. I abandon the chair and throw my fists against the Mirror of Desire. A hard, thin pain slides against my fingers. I barely feel it, even when the ground is dusted with blood.

"THORN!" Rose throws down her candlestick and races around the room, toppling the others until only a dim, sliver of light pools in from the open door. Reflections turn to shadow. The ghosts scurry away.

I drop to the floor. Rose appears by my side, her hand hovering over my shoulder.

"Thorn?"

I groan. "I am sick of seeing."

"Seeing what?"

She cannot be so clueless...

I look at her, but cannot stand the weight of her gaze, cannot stand to look at what I cannot have. I turn away, but she grabs my face. "Listen to me," she hisses, "I know what you are! I know *exactly* who you are."

I seize her wrists roughly. "Then what am I, Rose?" My voice is hoarse, hard, almost... almost monstrous.

With her tiny wrists in my grip, and the bitterness burning in my chest, I have never felt more like a monster.

Even Rose looks shocked, but she pulls her hands away and places one palm against my cheek, the other over my chest.

"You are just like me," she says. "Your soul is shaped like mine."

But what does it matter what our souls are shaped like, if you do not want its container? What does the shape matter if mine will never be free?

Rose tugs at my hands. "Come, let me help you—"

I jerk them away from her. Why does she only care when I'm in pain? Why is that the only time she wants to be with me?

It's pity. It's all just pity. Anything more just stems from that. She just doesn't want me to be alone, and she doesn't want to be alone herself. If there's love, it's

morphed or misplaced or just *not quite right*. A product of circumstance. Something that will fade when she's returned to her family.

I stand up.

"Thorn! Let me help you!"

"Like you let me help you?"

She says nothing else, and I march up to the terrace alone without looking back.

Chapter Twenty-Three



The Ball

At first light, I hear Rose leave the castle. I watch her from the window as she walks towards the meadow, and treads the line of fog there, half disappearing into it. Her fingers graze it like the surface of a pond.

I know she wants to leave. I wonder if she's searching for an entrance.

If I opened the gateway now, if it appeared in front of her, I wonder if she would go through it. If she would snatch her chance without looking back.

Without saying goodbye.

I go to breakfast. She comes in time.

"Nice walk?" I ask. My voice is angry. I cannot help it. I am angry. At her, at myself, at Moya, at my mother. At the whole, impossible situation.

"I went to the meadow." There are other words there, ones unspoken. *I went to the meadow because I wanted to get away from you.*

This stops any conversation. We eat in silence. Eventually, it gets so awkward, that the fairies trickle in and try to generate pleasantries.

"So, the ball tomorrow!" Ophelia chimes. "I'm very excited. Are you excited?" Neither one of us replies.

"I'm looking forward to it," Ariel says loudly. "I've prepared some divine music."

"And you will positively *die* when you see my ball gown!" Margaret beams.

The poor choice of words is too much, and I let out a low growl. They hush immediately.

Rose drops her spoon with a clatter and walks away, running back to her room. Good. I want her gone. I can't stand to be in her presence and not *be with her*.

But I want her back, too.

A while later, I knock at her door.

"Yes?" she snaps.

There is a long pause before I find the courage to speak, measuring my voice carefully when I find it. "Do you still want to have this ball?"

She waits a long while before replying. "The others have worked so hard."

"Do *you* still want it?"

Another pause. "Yes."

I think of leaving. I think of bursting into the room and grabbing her. I think of confessing everything, or grovelling, of begging her to love me or stay or leaving me to die in peace. I can't do anything. I am chained to this spot.

I hear Rose shuffle off the bed and cross the room. I feel her press against the door. The slightest weight glides against me. Something of her seems to burst out of the corridor, suffusing the air between us. I can feel it as keenly as temperature when I reach out to touch the barrier dividing us.

"Thorn..." she whispers, "I have... I have almost another five months here. I don't think we can continue being mad at each other."

I exhale softly. My chest hurts. "I'm not mad at you."

"I'm not mad at you, either."

Then what are you mad at, Rose? What do you feel?

I wonder, even if we had all the time in the world, if she would ever share herself with me.



I drift back to my room and lie on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. The plaster is cracked, and the longer I stare, the wider the scars become.

What is wrong with us?

Ariel appears on my pillow. She sits there for a long time, not speaking, short, I think, of any advice to offer.

"Want to know something that makes absolutely no sense?" she says eventually.

"I know plenty of things like that." I sigh. I know she is here to try to cheer me up. "But I am happy to know more. Pray tell."

"Sometimes I'm jealous of you."

I snap around to face her. "*What?*"

"I told you it made no sense. It's a strange, recent thing. I see how much you love Rose. I see it so clearly I can almost feel it. I... I want to know what that's like. I know that's foolish, given what this love could cost you, but... I have no idea what it's like to feel that way about anyone."

I cannot think of anything to say to that.

She sighs, her tiny form shrinking. "There's another reason I didn't leave the castle. One I didn't tell you."

"Oh?"

"I didn't think the outside world held anything for me. What would I *do* out there, without my friends? It has been Margeret, Ophelia and I for so long, through so much. I chose them, and you, over freedom. I chose the love of my friends over the possibility of love elsewhere."

"Why... why are you telling me this?"

"I'm wondering if Rose is similar. I'm wondering if she loves her family so much because they're safe to love, or because she doesn't have a choice. I'm wondering what's holding her back because I can't see any good reason why she shouldn't love you by now."

I swallow. "None of the others did."

"No, but she isn't them. *She* should love you. She's your match, I think. Your mate. Sometimes we love who's there, who's good for us, who's in the right place and the right time. Logically, there must be dozens, hundreds of people who we could form a connection with. But I don't think it's like that with her. I think you would have picked her out of the entire world. I've seen enough in my life to know that true love is real. If... if she isn't it..."

"You'll find out, one way or another."

"No, I won't," Ariel snaps, "because if you don't tell her, I don't think she's going to say it first."

I pause, unsure of what to say.

"I know you're afraid," she says. "I understand *why*. There is so much to lose. I've got a lot to lose too, you know? But... she doesn't know that. And I think she's afraid in an ordinary, mortal way. One that perhaps we can't quite understand. But... if there's one thing I know about her, it's that she would never want to hurt you. Please, dear little princeling, tell her how you feel. The night of the ball."

I swallow, and she slowly dribbles away.



In the hours leading up to the ball, the fairies are all a-flutter, moving swiftly between my room and Rose's. Even Bramble is caught up in the excitement; he cannot decide who he wants to be with, and keeps skidding back from one room to the next. Ariel forces him into wearing a bowtie while Margaret and Ophelia shove me into the tub and scrub me within an inch of my life, scenting my fur with something that smells faintly of cinnamon.

They towel me dry, which takes forever. In the past they used to dry me with magic but that had the terrible tendency of making my fur fluff up like a poodle's... not the best look when you're trying to confess your affections.

I must do it. I *must*. Damn the consequences.

My hair is clipped, my nails cleaned, filed and polished. My horns are dusted. A dark blue suit is summoned, a streamlined, tailored garment, with dozens of gold embellishments, an intricate pattern of thorns and roses.

Not a bad outfit to die in.

I am pushed in front of a mirror, and made to say nice things about myself. They do not come easily, but the clothing does help.

"Are you ready?" Margaret asks, the smile ripe in her voice.

"No."

Ariel whips me on the back with something. "You got this."

I swallow my nerves. I haven't got anything but a bad case of cowardice.

Bramble licks the back of my hand, and then skids out of the door. Ophelia drifts in.

“You need to get downstairs!” she says. “Your lady awaits!”

I am forced into the foyer to wait for her, a trembling, beastly bundle.

Get a hold of yourself.

When I see her descending the stairs, my heart stops, and for a moment I fear it may never start again. I have always found her beautiful, but this... this is the moment. Every other second of beauty in my life will be eclipsed by this one. I am both horrified and mesmerised by the idea that this is the most beautiful thing I shall ever witness.

She is dressed in the most exquisite gown of white and gold. It is simple and extravagant, billowing and dainty, made with shimmering thread and layers of soft white gossamer. She could be wearing a cloud. She reminds me of summer sunsets. Her hair is studded with pearls and petals, but she wears no jewellery apart from her rosebud necklace.

“You... you look...” My voice wavers. “You look beautiful, Rose. Otherworldly.”

She smiles. “A statement that applies to us both.”

I chuckle. “Which one?”

“Both.”

Tonight, I believe her. Despite the distance between us these last few days, I believe her. No other eyes have seen me like hers have.

I cannot take my eyes off her. I worry that my gaze will make her nervous, but she displays no such emotion. Indeed, she seems perfectly happy. Quieter than usual, but warm and kind and charming.

Soft music plays as we sit down to dine through five courses of the most exquisite food I have ever eaten. The conversation is light, slow but not uncomfortable. I am intimately aware of everything I am doing, everything around me. I wonder if Rose is at all aware.

She compliments the cuisine, the garlands wrapped around the pillars, the magnificent blooms that Ophelia has sourced. Everything is utterly magical. Her eyes shine.

After dessert, we step out onto the balcony for a minute. There are a few final rays of sunset left, night hurrying in. Earlier, now. The nights are growing longer again. There is a sharp change in the landscape, a shift in the air, the vivid greens dissolving into brown and bronze. It should be beautiful, but it makes me think of rot.

“A fine evening,” Rose declares. “Reminds me of the one that Tromeo and Lessida spent together, before...”

Before he went off to war, and they were separated for years.

I lean against the railing. “You’ve read that many times.”

“I wanted to know why you liked it so.”

“And? Have you worked it out?”

“I think you’re a romantic. I think you like the selflessness of their love, and the endurance of it.”

I tilt my head at her. I feel like a part of our dynamic has shifted back to those first few weeks and days, to when I was searching for scraps of the person she was. I am still trying to unravel her, and yet I feel sick at each question, my heart hammering at her response.

“And you?” I ask. “What do you think of it?”

“I... I’m not a romantic,” she says.

I snort. It seems difficult to believe, the amount of time she spends buried inside a romance.

"I'm not," she continues. "I... I might enjoy reading the occasional romance, but I don't... I don't *feel* it like you do."

Is she trying to tell me something else? Something else she doesn't feel like I do?

"Rose," I ask trepidatiously, wondering if her answer might end me, "what do you think of love?"

"It makes a fine story," she replies, as swift and sure as an arrow.

I hide my trembling. "And for yourself?"

"I'm..." She pauses. "I'm not sure that romance is to be a part of my story." She shakes her head, as if to snatch back the words, and adds, "my future."

"Why... why not?"

"I'm not sure I have it in me."

A cold panic gnaws at my heart, a wildfire of frost. Does she mean she can't love me, or that she can't love anyone? Am I so impossible to love, or is she simply incapable of it?

How can anyone be *incapable*?

The coldness clings to me, chipping away. The panic brews. She doesn't love me. She *can't*.

Music stirs from inside. She turns to me. "Can you dance with me?"

"Of course," I respond, "I can deny you nothing."

How can she go from saying she cannot love me to saying she wants to dance? Does she not realise what she has said?

Why can't I ask her to elaborate?

Because any more will crush you entirely. Any more and they'll be none of you left. You can't die, now. You can't hurt her, you can't ruin this night.

The music lifts into my heart, filling the caverns Rose carved in it mere moments ago. The weight of her body in mine helps too, tethering me to the earth when I want to fall away from it. The strings bring me back to life. The room lifts, sways, moves with us, transforms from stone and marble and glass into living flesh. Everything hums with life, a different, impossible kind of magic.

For a moment, beneath a ceiling of stars and flowers, I cannot be desperate. I cannot be lost to despair. The music sings between us like a separate kind of being, and the colours of the room swirl together, diamonds of sensation in an ink-black sky.

I want to paint this, but I also know that it is beyond the ability of any artist to render this moment. No one knows the colour of a soul, or how to imbue the breath of two beating hearts onto canvas.

The music ends. Rose is in my arms, her eyes tightly shut. A dusting of something silver coats her dark lashes. I want to press her into me, to seal up the gap of loneliness, to bridge all spaces between us forever. How can it possibly be that she doesn't feel this, this connection between us, this heart in my chest that beats for only her?

"Rose." I breathe her name, part sigh, part question. I wrap my arms around her, cocooning her in my embrace, as if I can thread our bodies together with wishing.

A clock chimes, echoing round the chamber like a drum. Rose breaks away, taking a chink of me with her.

"It is late," she says, edging towards the doors. She wrenches her gaze from me and something snaps inside between us. I cannot let her go.

With final desperation I stream towards her, catching her wrist and pulling her up into my arms. She does not resist. Quite the opposite in fact. She folds into my

embrace without any hesitation.

Say it, I beg her privately. Say that you love me. Free me, rescue me, be with me.

But she says nothing.

“Rose...” My voice is not my own. *Say it. Say it!*

But before I can, she breaks away from me, pushing herself to the floor and scrambling for the exit. She runs up the stairs without looking back. Her door closes with a deafening thud.

I prowl the corridor for some time, hearing the desperate ripping of fabric, the sound of water running, Rose sinking into the tub.

I think I hear her sobbing.

What have I done?

“I love you, Rose,” I whisper to her closed door, certain she cannot hear me.

I realise then, with resounding clarity, exactly what I have done in keeping her here. I have been so preoccupied with her hurting me, I have barely paused to think about how I am breaking her heart, too.

I know what I need to do.

And I know, with absolute certainty, that it will kill me.

Chapter Twenty-Four



The Sacrifice

If she can't love me, let me fall out of love with her; I pray to whatever gods will hear me. If I can't love her... don't let me endure this any longer. People have fallen out of love before. Break the spell love holds me under. Let it be done with me.

It soon will be. When she leaves, she will take my heart with her, and I will die assuredly as if a knife were plunged in my chest. That death would be quicker, less painful.

I wish I didn't have to die. I wish I could forget her. I wish I could fall out of love with her.

And at the same time, I'm still glad I met her. Even after all of this.

Rose doesn't leave her room the next day, or the day after that. Any hope of some reprieve, of her emerging from her own despair and explaining things to me withers and dies. I think she has already tried to explain it, and I'm just fooling myself. She loves me, but not like I love her. Not enough. Not like *that*.

I still go to her three times.

"Talk to me, Rose. Let me help."

"Rose, please! Just let me in!"

“Tell me what’s wrong.”

Sometimes, I think she whispers something back, but I cannot hear her.

The fairies try to speak to her too, but she’s utterly despondent and barely eating. They report little of what she says and even less of what she looks like, but their silence speaks volumes. She is wasting away.

And I am letting her.

On the third day, I try once more. “You know I would do anything to make you happy. Anything within my power. Tell me what you want, Rose.”

She does not. I sigh, my chest caving.

“Do you want me to leave?”

Silence. Finally, I summon the courage to answer the question I am dreading.

“Do you want to go home?”

The ghost of an answer. “Yes.”

There is no coming back from this. It is the final confirmation that I need. I breathe carefully, and slope back to my room.

Ariel appears before I reach it. “You better not be doing what I think you’re going to—” she snaps.

I close the door in her face, and banish her from the room.



I take two days to myself. One is hoping for some last minute reprieve, for Rose to appear at my door and confess her affections, for her to tumble into my arms and weep and hold me until I unravel.

The second day I take for myself. I do not know how swiftly my end will come upon me, so I make everything neat and tidy, re-read parts of my favourite books, visit my mother’s portrait and my father’s tomb.

The gardens continue to wilt. I’m not sure I have much time left, if I’m to use them to power my opening of the gate.

I may have banished the fairies from my room, but they find other ways of getting around my commands, ambushing me elsewhere in the castle or leaving notes where I am certain to find them.

“I’m sorry,” I tell them, “but I have to let her go. This curse is killing her as surely as it is killing me.”

“But what if it’s *not* her family that she’s missing?” Ariel pleads. “What if it’s *you*?”

“You heard her. She doesn’t think love will be a part of her future.”

“Because she loves *you*! Because she doesn’t think she’ll have another chance! She doesn’t know what you are! She doesn’t know she can have everything—”

“You don’t know that either!” I bark. “Leave me. Speak to me no more tonight.”

It is a flimsy instruction. When I get up the next morning at first light, she meets me on the way out of the castle. I have to do it today. I have been putting this off long enough.

“Don’t—” she starts.

“I will command you from saying anything in my presence ever again if you try to stop me from opening the gate,” I tell her. “I don’t want to, but I will. I’d rather have your company. Walk with me?”

“Fine,” she says, her form shrivelling.

She drifts beside me all the way down to the meadow.

“Where are Ophelia and Margaret?”

“They don’t want to watch this.”

I’m sure they’ll appear after she’s gone. I hope they will. I don’t want to be alone at the end.

I reach the wall of fog. I stare at it for the longest time, unblinking, unmoving. I don’t want it to work. I want it to stay closed. I want an excuse to keep her.

But if I have to spend another night listening to her sob herself to sleep, or knowing how much she is hurting, I might break just as easily.

I inhale deeply, feeling the faint rivulets of fairy magic I inherited from my mother glimmering through my veins. The garden breathes with me. I feel the ebb and flow of nature, the strings of life stirring through every branch, petal and leaf. I tug on them gently, easing them forward, pulling them into the fog and towards the gateway that separates us from the rest of the world.

I think of Rose’s family, of their faces, of the snatches of the cottage I saw in the mirror. I anchor the threads to that vision, assuring the gate will open where it is supposed to.

A click, a clack, like a key in a lock. The fog parts, and a way has opened.

In and out I breathe, painfully and with difficulty, and slowly begin the walk back to the castle.

Ariel makes it to the corridor before she finds a way to sidestep my instructions, and flees across my path. I told her not to say anything as I opened the gate, but now it is open and she can say what she likes.

“Don’t do this!” she begs, her voice frantic, even angry.

“I must.”

“Just give it more time—”

“I’ve given it time enough. The garden is beginning to wilt. If I don’t do it now, she may not get another chance—” It’s too late now, anyway. I’ve probably already drained it.

“She can go back in five months. *She will wait.*”

“She is not happy. You know that.”

“You don’t know the reason—”

“Do you?”

Something moves in Rose’s room. I hear Bramble rolling off the bed, footsteps on the floor. “Do you two mind?” she hisses. “I’m trying to sleep!”

It’s too late. There is no turning back. I dismiss Ariel with a wave of my hand and lean against the door. Anything to be a little closer to her, just a little longer.

“Rose,” I say carefully, “can you get dressed, and meet me in the foyer as soon as you are ready?”

“Yes,” Rose replies, her voice heavy, “I’ll be down soon.”

She does not dress as quickly as I expect. I wonder why she didn’t question me, why, for the first time in days, she did as I asked. Does she suspect what I’m about to do?

Finally, and all too soon, she arrives at the door.

“Are you ready?” I ask.

“For what?”

“Follow me.”

She doesn’t, and I have no time or patience to act kindly today. The gateway is open and I need to close it quickly, and before my resolve crumbles, along with everything else. I turn back and seize her wrist, yanking her after me, trying not to think about how this may be the last time we ever touch.

If she doesn’t slap me...

I march her to the edge of the grounds and point to the meadow, waiting for her to see, to understand. She blinks at me instead.

“What? What is it?”

I gesture again.

“It’s just the meadow.”

I cannot find the words, but her eyes continue to gaze, widening suddenly in understanding.

“The stream,” she whispers, “it’s not... How is this even... It’s... it’s not possible.”

I swallow. “Yes, it is.”

Her face turns back to me, and for the first time since we met, she looks at me in abject horror. “You? You... you can open it?”

“Yes.”

She stares at me, her lips trembling.

“Ask the question, Rose.”

“Have you... have you always known?”

“That I could open it? Yes. The entire time you were here.”

“No. *No.*” She shakes her head, tears eking out of her eyes. “I don’t believe you. You’ve... you’ve just figured it out, or... or something—”

“Why would I lie to help you hate me?”

“I don’t know!” She balls her fingers into fists. “Ariel!” she screams. “Where are you?”

“She won’t come.”

But she does. I never told her not to stop Rose, only not to tell her the truth these past few days. Because if Rose knows the true cost, she will not go, and she will wither away like the garden.

“Tell me,” she begs, “tell me he’s lying. Tell me he hasn’t known this the whole time.”

Ariel is silent. Her little form shrivels. “He has always known,” she says quietly. “Ever since your mother.”

“My... what?”

“Your mother was only here for a few weeks,” she says. “It was the day of her wedding, when she came here. Thorn felt so terrible that she was to be trapped here away from your father, that he began to look for a way to open the gate prematurely.”

“How... how can he do that?”

“A gift,” I explain, careful of my next words, “from the fairy queen. I am a fey creature too, after all. I have a magic of my own.”

“It can’t... it can’t be as easy as that.”

“It isn’t,” Ariel interjects.

“Ariel—” I growl warningly, unsure of how much she can give away without defying my commands.

“A sacrifice of sorts needs to be made.”

“What... what sort of sacrifice?” Rose looks at me, but I avoid her gaze.

“The garden,” I say quietly. “I drained the life of it to open the gateway for her.”

Rose swallows. “How... how long have you been able to send me home?”

I raise an eyebrow, surprised at how swiftly she’s realised I wasn’t *always* keeping her here, that to begin with she truly was as trapped as I am.

“Since a little before it opened of its own accord,” I admit. “It did not seem to matter, then. You were going home anyway. I told myself that a few more weeks

with you was worth the lie, was worth the garden...”

“But then I lost my chance.” She looks down again, hot, angry tears sliding down her cheeks. “But... why?”

“Because I was selfish. Because I did not want to be alone again, and because I tried to convince myself that you wanted to stay.”

“Maybe I did want to!” Rose spits. “Maybe, if you’d just told me... I could have gone home, let my family know I was safe, and come back here! Maybe that’s exactly what I wanted!”

My heart howls. She would have come back? She just wanted her family to know she was all right?

She throws up my arms. “Why does everyone here *lie*?”

Ariel hovers closer. “Rose—”

“Go back to the castle, Ariel,” I bark.

“There’s more—”

“Ariel. Return.”

Ariel’s little form shrivels. “Fine,” she snaps, and promptly disappears.

“I don’t want to hear the rest,” Rose whispers.

“You... you would have stayed?” My voice is hoarse. “You would have come back?”

“Maybe.”

“But... why?” *Please, please, please—tell me why! Do I honestly mean more to you than them?*

“It doesn’t matter now.” Her voice is like stone. She turns towards the stream. The fog is growing thicker. I can feel it wanting to snap shut. We do not have long.

No, no, don’t go—tell me what you mean!

She takes two very slow steps forward. I feel like a condemned man, waiting for the swing of the axe.

Stop. Please. Wait. Come back.

There’s a moment when I think she will. She half turns, one cheek facing me, and a silver tear slides down it. I wait for her to turn completely, to look me in the eye, to fly into my arms or even to hit me.

Let me touch you again. Just once more.

“Goodbye, Thorn,” she whispers.

The whole time she is running away, I am begging her to return. I am waiting for her to change her mind, to choose me, but I know I am asking the impossible. *Don’t be angry. Don’t be bitter. Don’t be afraid. It’s better this way. She will be happy. It is the right thing to do.*

She races off through the meadow, not looking back as the grass whips her skin, snatching at her clothes. I watch helplessly as she reaches the stream and slides down the bank, tearing across the stones and up the other side, where she hits the ground with such force that she rolls over. She sprints with the same desperate abandon as that first day.

The gate snaps shut.

The minute she vanishes from view I feel a pain in my chest so intense that I am sure I’m being torn asunder. It is so real, so physical, that I expect to see blood. It is like I have lost an arm, only the wound cuts deeper. I scream, and the voice of a monster rises from my throat. *Let me turn into the monster*, I pray, *let this all just fade away. The monster could live without her, the monster wouldn’t care.*

The fairies join me seconds later. Ophelia is openly weeping, but Ariel is furious. Her tiny form pummels against my chest. I feel nothing.

“How could you! How. Could. You—” Her thumping gets weaker. Ophelia’s sobs slowly subside. The agony inside me only increases. This is it, I think. It’s like the curse said. If my heart is broken, I will break. I am dying, actually dying.

Let it be quick.

For a second, I imagine I hear her voice, calling out to me in desperation. I open my eyes, expecting to see her, but there is nothing but fog. I am only imagining her, or perhaps she is my heaven, calling to me, if I deserve such a place.

“Did you hear that?” says Margaret. “She’s calling for you.”

Why? Why? After everything?

I sink to the floor.

“Thorn!” Ariel cries.

“I’m still here.”

“I’d hold on, if I were you,” Margaret advises. “I’m hopeful yet of a miracle. All is not yet lost.”

How can she even say that?

I pull myself to my feet. I do not know how long it will take, but I know I need to see her again first. I drag myself to the Hall of Mirrors.

“Show me Rose,” I beg.

The mirror shows me her walking through the wood, arm in arm with a young man with dark red hair. Her brother. How has she been reunited with him already? Had he been out in the woods? She is smiling, burying herself in his shoulder.

She once walked with me like that...

She reaches their cottage, and I watch her watch two children in the garden. It is such a pretty little house, such a lovely garden. Such beautiful people. They have to be Beau and Hope.

They run to her, and she is crying. Crying and calling their names, and kissing them, and clinging on to them in a way she never clung to me. Watching her with her father is even worse. The love pours out of them all.

She will never return, but she will be happy. I have done the right thing.

I hope she will remember me, fondly, affectionately. I hope the memories of us bring her nothing but joy. The last thing in the world I want is to bring her pain.

I watch her all day. I do not stop to eat, I have no stomach for food. I just need to see her, for as long as possible. Who knows how much longer the mirrors will last.

At last, she goes to bed. I can feel my own eyes drooping. I am exhausted from opening the gateway, exhausted from lack of food. Rose slips easily into her old bed, closing her eyes. Her sister crawls into bed with her and squeezes her middle, frightened she’ll vanish in the night. Her father, brother, nanny—all check in on her. She has no idea how much she is loved.

She has no idea how much I love her.

But I have been selfish, keeping her here, focusing on my pain. What of hers, what of her family’s? They have clearly missed her immeasurably. I thought of them, in the early days, but I didn’t really comprehend what her absence would mean to them. I didn’t fully understand love.

Her life is better without me. I should resign myself to that idea. She should have let me die before, let Moya have her way, let the sickness carry me off. That would have been more merciful.

This is for the best. She will be happy now. And if she is happy, I must be too.

I just wish we could have been happy together.

“Thorn...”

My eyes prick up. It cannot be?

“Thorn...”

In the dim light of her tiny bedroom, I see her hands curl around her necklace. I touch my own. It feels oddly warm.

She has every reason to hate me now, and yet she does not.

I feel Margaret’s presence beside me. “There is yet magic,” she says, “and there is still hope. Hold on a little longer, my boy. She may surprise you yet.”

Chapter Twenty-Five



If I Can't Love Her

I wake up the next morning in front of the mirror, having fallen asleep beside it, still reaching for her. I am surprised to be alive, held on by some faint threads of hope, possibly, but I feel like a ghost nonetheless. My body is only half my own.

I can't eat. The food tastes of nothing. I feel like I'd retch up anything I forced down.

Bramble sticks to my side as I float into her room, whining pitifully. I came here only once, after Grace left, to tidy up. It was quite therapeutic, putting her remnants away, clearing up that short interlude in my life.

There is no such comfort here.

Grace left so little behind, but Rose's room has the eeriness of a tomb. Her unfinished things haunt me, the ghost of her life rattling around the chamber. She is in everything I touch, in all I behold, all I feel. Her scent still clings to the unmade bed, her warmth to her brush, her life and light to the half-finished book on the bedside.

It is like she will walk in at any moment.

A vase of roses wilts on her dresser. These, I think, I cannot leave. I go to sweep up the dead petals with my hands, but several of them slide into the half-

open drawer. I tug it gently, hoping to scoop out the escapees.

The drawer is full of pressed flowers and neatly folded ribbons. It takes me a few seconds before I realise what this drawer contains, until I recognise the curled lace ribbon, wrapped around the smallest bouquet of snowdrops.

This is my drawer, the drawer of all the things I have given her, preserved as if they were precious heirlooms, wealthy trinkets. She hasn't thrown away one bud, a single frayed ribbon.

I take out everything in turn, trying to imagine her thoughts as she placed them in there. Right at the very back is a scrunched up ball of paper. It seems so out of place amongst the rest of the items that I first think she must have stashed it there accidentally, but I unroll it nevertheless.

Dearest Thorn, it reads.

I stop. This letter is addressed to me. When did she write it? Should I even be reading it? She never gave it to me for a reason, stuffed it away, for a reason.

But they are her words, her words to me, and I cannot help but want to cling to them.

Before she wrote "dearest," she wrote *dear*. I like her addition, like that she thought dear too trivial. I am her *dearest*, her most. I know people use that expression often amongst family, but I choose to believe, in this moment, it was meant for a larger purpose.

I did not ask to come here, but now, I cannot imagine my life taking another route. I don't think I want to go. No, I know I want to go home. I do, so badly, but I am not ready to say goodbye to you.

I don't think I'll ever be ready.

She must have written this letter before the gateway opened the first time, when she thought she would be leaving. Before I nearly died. Before she gave up home to save me.

She didn't want to leave. She wasn't ready. Six months of my company and she wasn't ready.

There is only a little more of the letter. I am afraid to read the rest. I have so little left.

In short, I cannot imagine my life without you.

Then come home. Somehow. If it's true, come home. To me, to us. To whatever you wish. Just come back.

You are the greatest friend—

Her letter stops there. Was she interrupted? No, she had time to screw it up and shove it away. Something irked her about her words. Did she regret them? Did she wish to take them back? Why then, hide it? Why not dispose of it entirely?

I think, I hope, that her frustration was with not being able to finish, not being able to find the words to say goodbye.

She stopped writing after the word "friend". Is it too much to hope that it was that word that infuriated her so? Did she realise that she could not sum me up in such a way?

I could never have squeezed her into such a description.



I go back to watching her in the mirrors, getting as close to her as I can. She's been reunited with her sister, Honour, who's expecting a baby. Rose never mentioned anything before. Was this one of the reasons she wanted to return so badly? She would have missed the birth if she'd stayed another five months.

Grace died giving birth to Beau. It can't have been easy for her, if she knew. It can't be easy for Honour.

Perhaps she needs her sister more than I do.

Rose is resting against her chest, and Honour is stroking her hair, long and slowly. Every so often the baby kicks, and Rose's face lights up in amazement. She grins at her sister, placing her hand to her bump. She is utterly mesmerised.

Another sharpness pings in my chest, because moments like that are beyond me forever.

The sisters stay like that for a long, long time. If they spoke about her time in the castle, if they spoke about me at all, it was before I started watching. Rose is silent now, contemplative.

I wonder what she's thinking. She is thinking deeply about something, I am sure, but her face is an utter mystery. How can I know someone so well and still have no clue what they are thinking half of the time? I know her likes and dislikes, her fears, a semblance of her desires. I know what kind of person she is. But when her mind goes wandering, she is so far away from me. Her thoughts are an ocean, and I am stranded in a desert.

She said her soul was shaped like mine.

She believes that we are the same, that we are alike in the ways that matter. Nobody has ever said such a thing to me. Why was I so held up in my anger and frustration that I never truly considered the weight of those words?

"Are you all right, dearest?" Honour asks, still stroking her hair.

"I miss him," Rose replies.

Is she talking about me?

"I know, dearheart, I know."

Rose buries herself in Honour's chest, and says nothing more.



I watch her for the rest of the day, the fairies beside me, as if they expect me to fade away into a wisp of smoke if they do not keep me company. They try to force me to eat, but I can't. Even Bramble, stalking my side, has little of an appetite. He's pining too.

"I should have let him go with Rose."

"No, you shouldn't," snips Margaret. "You deserve company, boy. You deserve far more than you've ever had."

"Still," I say, not sure if I believe her, "it doesn't seem fair that he should have to suffer."

"He'll be fine," Margaret insists, although she sounds dubious. I wonder if she's remembering Raven. I wonder if she remembers his name.

I wonder what will happen to the three of them.

"Is there any way that you three could—"

"Stop," says Ariel, "just stop."

"Even if we could go, we wouldn't," Ophelia says quietly. "Isn't that right, ladies?"

“Quite right,” says Margaret. “We’ve lived long lives, dear. Don’t you worry about us. Don’t you worry about anything.”

I turn back to the mirror. Rose has been silent most of the day, listening to others rather than talking herself. Honour has just departed, most of the family heading outside to see her off. Rose finds herself alone in the main room for a split moment.

Her face turns grey and pale, and for a short second, it looks like she might faint. She grabs hold of the mantelpiece just as Hope comes back in.

“Rose? What’s wrong?”

“I’m never going to see him again!”

It’s like she’s only just realised what has truly happened. I hold out my hand to the glass. *It’s all right, Rose—*

But it isn’t all right. It isn’t all right because she isn’t coming back, because I’m never going to see her before me in the flesh. I’m never going to hold her again in my arms, and we’re never going to be together.

“I told you she loved you,” Margaret says. “Hold on, my boy.”

To what?

“The doorway will open again,” Ariel says, but her words sound more like a desperate, frantic plea, like someone begging death for a reprieve. “Just hold on until the next solstice!”

Five months, without Rose? Even without a cursed, breakable heart, I’m not sure I could survive it.

“Sure,” I tell her, knowing that I’m lying. “I survived a couple of decades without her. A few months shouldn’t kill me, right?”



I do not move from that spot, sleeping when I can, but watching her the rest of the time. I do not care if this is some kind of violation. It is the last dream of a dying man.

The next day, Rose’s father presents her with a book her mother left to her, with the instructions it be given to her on her eighteenth birthday.

You really could see the future, couldn’t you, Grace? Or enough of it to sense you wouldn’t live to see your children grow.

Rose opens the tome. It is a thick volume of fairytales, but it is called *The Fey Collection*. This is not a word that mortals frequently use, and solidifies my belief that Rose is indeed descendant from the same fairies that fled this realm, long ago.

Rose reads, and I ask the mirror to show me in the inscription, written in Grace’s long, elegant hand.

My darling Rose,

You will know most of these stories already, but I have them here, written down for you, just in case. These are the stories of our ancestors. My mother gave this to me on my eighteenth birthday, and her mother gave it to her. Share these stories with your brothers and sisters, my little fairy. Be adventurous. Be afraid. Be brave. Above all, love fearlessly, for as long and hard as you can.

All the love in the world,

Mama

Rose blinks back tears as she flicks through the volume. She comes across a story that talks about *here*, a castle that acts as a prison to an evil fairy. It says she is guarded by a terrifying monster, but a neat line crosses through that part. Another hand has written over it, "*the castle is protected by a beautiful creature.*" In the margin, Grace has added, "*He is not a monster!*"

Thank you, Grace. Thank you.

Rose tries not to cry, but she does not do a very good job. She clasps her necklace. At least I didn't imagine the connection between us. At least she is still thinking of me.

I wonder how long it will take her to forget me.

I wonder if she never will.

Which would I prefer?

There is something else folded into the wrappings of the book. A hand mirror. I recognise it as one I gifted to Grace. In the old days, she could have used it to talk to me, but the magic had all dried out by the time I gave it to her. It was no more than a remembrance.

And yet, when Rose holds it to her chest, the slightest warmth falls over me, and, for a second, I imagine she sees me, too.

I am still here, Rose. I am here if you want me.

Chapter Twenty-Six



The Mother in the Meadow

Grace meets me in the meadow that night. The grass is grey and lifeless. The flowers turn to ashes when they graze against her skirts. She looks out over the stream.

"I used to walk to the meadow and imagine you standing here, where I am now," she says. "And now I am standing here, imagining my family."

I stand by her side, unsure of what to say. I realise I am in my beast form. The one I was always meant to die in.

"I know why you let her go," she says, "but you were wrong."

"You didn't try to stop me."

"You would not have listened. You were past listening." She turns to me, her eyes alight with venom. She looks more like Rose than ever. "You *fool!* She loves you, you know. *She loves you.*"

"Then why didn't she say it?"

"Because she's *afraid!*"

"Of what?"

"Of everything. Of the impossible weight of letting herself love someone."

"You... you can't know that."

“Yes,” says Grace quietly, “I can.”

She clicks her fingers, and I am standing in Rose’s childhood bedroom. Honour and Hope are asleep on one of the beds, Freedom on another. Rose is lying against him, but her eyes are wide awake. Frost gnaws at the pain.

“What’s... what’s this?” I turn to Grace.

Grace looks at the faces of her sleeping children, but there’s little of softness in her expression. “A memory,” she says. “One I wanted her to share with you, because she has shared it with no one.”

“What—”

“Hush,” she says. “It’ll happen soon.”

The sound of something mewling echoes down the corridor. A baby. Rose’s face lights up, and she rushes from the bed, streaming out of the room and streaking across the landing. She stops shortly in front of her parents’ door.

Grace is lying on the bed, but it is awash with blood. A tiny infant is wrapped up in the nanny’s arms, howling at the top of his lungs. Everyone else is deathly quiet.

Rose stands there, struck still. For an age, no one moves except for Beau.

Until Grace notices her daughter standing at the threshold. She holds out her hands, slick with blood.

“Don’t be afraid, Rose. Don’t be frightened. Be brave, my dearheart. Be brave.”

Someone closes the door in Rose’s face.

Before I have a chance to react to what I have just seen, the cottage is swirling. We are still on the landing, but it’s another night. Grace’s coffin is laid out in the dining room, candles burning around her. Rose’s father is weeping over her body, pulling at her curls.

And Rose is watching.

Another night, and he’s staring at her empty chair, sobbing like a child.

And Rose is still watching.

For months, years afterwards, she watches him. Even when he no longer cries, she watches his gaze as he searches for his wife in a room she no longer inhabits, and never will again.

At one point, Honour reads them all a bedtime story. Beau is older now. He asks questions about love.

“I am never going to fall in love,” Rose whispers, unnoticed by anyone.

Anyone but Grace, still watching her children.

We whirl back to the meadow.

“Do you understand now?” she asks, not meeting my eyes.

“Yes,” I say, “I think so.” I think of Rose, who understood love far more than I gave her credit for, who watched it almost destroy her father and decided that to survive this world, she needed to stay away from it.

I’m sorry, Rose. I had no idea.

“Please,” Grace implores, “hold on for her. She’s almost ready.”

“I... I can’t last until the solstice. There’s no way—”

“Then hold on as long as you can.” She turns to face me. “Please. Don’t leave her alone in the world. She is coming for you, Thorn, hold on.”



Her words lose a fragment of their meaning when I wake the following day, but I trace the shape of them, willing myself to believe. It is not just in love, but in miracles.

I manage to eat a little, but not much.

Bramble isn't eating, either.

We walk together in the gardens. The leaves have fallen, and even the piles seemed sucked of colour. The birds have gone. Everything is still and silent.

It can't last until the solstice, can it? *We* can't last that long.

I wander to the corner of the grounds where I buried Raven, and ruffle Bramble's head. "You need to eat," I tell him.

He groans.

"She'll be even more mad at me if I can't even look after you."

We go back to the castle. The mirrors aren't working as well as they once were, dark and flickering. I remember this from before. I didn't think it would happen so soon, but I suppose the gardens were already dying, thanks to my dallying.

Yet another poor decision, on my behalf.

I really should have told her the truth.

Too late, now.

There is a sharp crack and Ariel appears beside me with a stack of letters.

"Rose wrote these to her sister," she says shortly. "Sometimes she'd throw them on the fire—to send them, I think—but since there was no way for me to send them, I saved them instead."

"Ariel!" I chide. "Those were private—"

"I was curious. Sue me," she says tersely. "I... I didn't read them, though. I thought you should."

"I can't—"

"You'll be dead in a few days. What have you got to lose?" she lets her words hang in the air for a moment, lets the sting settle in. "You might gain something."

I stare at the letters for a long while after she leaves, before taking them back to Rose's room. I fool myself into thinking I'm respecting her privacy, but I think perhaps I am merely saving them for the end.

Let hers be the last words I ever read.



Time loses its fixed definition, and a day, or two, or three later, I lie in front of the remains of the Mirror of Truth. The fairies swept up the shards and fixed the larger parts back into place, enough that I can see their faces, faint and indistinct though they are. A dozen pairs of eyes stare down at me.

I cannot see Rose any more.

The fairies are likely to fade soon, too. Back into the walls. My fault, my fault entirely.

"I am truly sorry," I say to them.

"There's no need to be sorry," says Margaret, her voice softer than I have ever heard it. "It couldn't be helped. You tried."

"Couldn't be helped?" The fury in Ariel's voice is palpable. "You should not have let her go!"

"I had to. I should have tried to long ago. It was selfish of me to keep her here."

"I do not think she minded," Ophelia offers quietly.

"She was happy to leave."

"That is not what I saw," Ariel persists. "I saw you practically throw her out! Didn't even let us say goodbye—"

"You would have stopped her."

"I would have told her the truth! Do you think she would have left if she knew why you hadn't let her go—"

"She might have done."

The fairies go quiet.

"Oh, my dear boy," says Margaret softly, and a hundred hands reach out towards me. "You actually still fear that, don't you? Even after everything?"

"If she stayed, it would not have been for the right reasons."

"I don't know," adds Ophelia, smiling weakly, "she was very reluctant to go, even after you told her that you were keeping her here. I am sure she'll be back, if... if you can wait."

I shake my head. "I watched her reunite with her family. She will not return. This is as it should be."

"This is not as it should be!" Ariel hisses venomously. "How could you just—she should be here! You need her and she—"

"Ariel, calm down. There's nothing to be done now."

"I'm sorry." Her voice cracks. A dozen tears slide into shards. "I just... I really liked her, and I like here, and I like the idea of having a body again, and I like you. This isn't fair!"

"We're still here," says Ophelia hopefully. "For now, at least. It isn't over yet."

Something stabs against my chest, like another piece of me falling away. "Yes, it is."

A dozen hands reach out to touch my shoulder, a dozen faces etched with sorrow. The reflections flicker, dimming like firelight.

"You... might..."

"Ariel?" The reflections are fading. Panic pulses in my chest. "No—"

"It's... right... here... still... won't... leave..."

"Margaret! Ophelia!"

Then they are gone, and I am alone once more.

For a moment, I think I hear something, a banging, a tapping against the glass. I turn towards the Mirror of Moments. Somehow, Rose's image is imprinted there, stained with some commingling of panic and despair. A vision conjured by my dying heart. The magic faded earlier.

"Rose," I whisper, "I know I am only imagining you, but will you stay, regardless?"

She nods faintly, although her reflection is already darkening. She mouths something—I just catch the word *forever*.

She is gone a second later. Forever is not long, for an echo. Not long for a human.

I turn towards the covered glass. It hums, as if alive.

"You can come now, Moya," I say. "There is nothing left for you to destroy."

Chapter Twenty-Seven



Letters

I stumble down to Rose's room and pull myself up onto the bed. The faint traces of her scent linger there. Bramble climbs up with me and lies down by my side. My hands glide along the pillow, to where I left her letters.

There are no other voices, no other sounds.

No point in being timid, in being polite. If there ever was in the first place.

I cannot have you. But I will have your words.

I begin with the first one, dated a few weeks after her arrival. This one is mostly about her family, about how much she misses them but wants them not to worry. Towards the end of the letter, however, she mentions me.

I also appear to have made a friend. I know, me, a friend! I suppose everyone has thought my quota of those filled for years? I thought so too. He is as much a prisoner here as I am—more so, perhaps, for he has never left—and there is a loneliness inside him that he hides as well as I hid mine. We share a love of literature, although not always of the same tastes, and he makes me laugh. You know precious few have managed to do that.

It is a little thing, our matching loneliness, our shared love. But it hints at our kindred spirits. I carry on reading. In every letter, she speaks of me. Sometimes just in passing, sometimes in a story—a funny thing I did or said, an idea I had. My presence becomes more and more the topic of conversation, the focus of her writing.

Dear Honour,

Thorn and I are becoming quite close. I feel no apprehension in telling you that I consider him the best friend I have ever had—apart from you, of course, dear sister. There is an ease I feel with him that I have never really felt with anyone else. A quiet, comfortableness to his presence. A part of this closeness is, to be sure, manufactured by our shared confinement. But much of it cannot be explained so bluntly. Had I been trapped here with that weasel Jean Dupont, for instance, I can guarantee I would not have grown so fond of him as I have of Thorn.

Dear Honour,

I tried to get Thorn to paint today. I say 'try' but I feel like he actually succeeded in the task. He is so very good with colour, and my room now plays home to his first piece: it is a beautiful explosion of colour. It reminds me of roses and raspberries and summer sunsets. He did not seem so fond of it as I did, he still seems to view his efforts through the eyes of mythical other people he has never met. I wish he could see the beauty of his work through my eyes. I wish he could see how beautiful he really is.

Then things became... strange. He said he wanted to kiss me. Obviously the two of us are built so differently I am not sure we would have much success in this department, but if I am completely honest... I wanted to kiss him. Or I wanted to tell him that I would let him, if we were the same. But I didn't say that. I didn't want him to think that I don't think of him as human... or that I think of him as any less than whatever I am. What is happening to us?

I pause in my reading, brushing errant tears away. *Oh Rose, why didn't you say anything?* The thought that she wanted to kiss me too swells up inside of me. She had thought of it. We were more than friends, if I needed any more proof.

Dear Honour,

Today, Thorn tried to teach me how to swim! I was utterly awful and spent most of it clinging onto his arms. I felt a little like a helpless damsel, and he the hero sent to rescue me... it is a silly thought, I know. I have never been one to play the princess! Do you remember how, once when we were children, Freed and I were playing a game and I asked him why I couldn't be the one to rescue him? He told me only girls needed rescuing so I smacked him in the face with my wooden sword and gave him a bloody nose and told him to rescue himself from that.

But Thorn doesn't make me feel helpless. I will admit... I liked being there, so close to him. It is the most comfortable place on earth. But it's strange, too. No other person has the ability to make me feel so much by doing so little. He makes me feel like the saviour and the saved.

I think I know what this feeling is, but I'm afraid to speak it.

Dear Honour,

Last night, the strangest thing occurred. Thorn asked me to marry him, completely out of the blue. Is he... is he in love with me? He didn't say that he was, but... it was implied, wasn't it?

I turned him down. I cannot stay, after all. But there was a fraction of a second when I considered it. No one else could render me so indecisive. If James had asked, I would have turned him down. I would have felt sorry for him, but not for myself. But with Thorn...

I cannot imagine meeting anyone else as interesting as him. I cannot imagine liking any one more. If things were different, if he were a boy from down the street...

But things are not different, are they? And I cannot imagine Thorn as anyone other than himself.

Dear Honour,

I worry about what will happen to Thorn when I go home. I worry about it so much that sometimes it keeps me up at night, with a sickness churning in my belly. It cuts into me, the thought of him here on his own. At least... at least he seems to have the fairies again now. But if they fade again, he'll be back to having no one. I can't bear it.

It's not as simple as guilt. It's almost as if I can already feel what he will feel. I have never cared about anyone this way. I am not like you. But I feel Thorn's pain like it is my own. It is monstrously, desperately unfair that he has been denied the freedoms we all take for granted. I do not want him to be alone again. I do not want him taken from my side.

Dear Honour,

I am beginning to worry that I will not have the strength to return to you all when the time comes. I just can't imagine standing in the meadow, watching Thorn be swallowed up by the mist, and knowing we shall never meet again. The two of us are connected by some strange, invisible bond. I feel that once we are separated, that bond will snap, and I will start to bleed inwardly. I shall not be able to bear it! He is my heart, and I can no sooner carve him out of me than I could carve out my own.

Why didn't she say this to me? I could have written her words myself, about her. I was bleeding inwardly. Yet her words offered a salve to the wound, soothed the pain, just a little.

Dear Honour,

I had the strangest dream last night. I dreamt I was swimming in the lake with Thorn, only he was human. Somehow I knew that it was him, and for that moment, in the dream, everything was perfect.

He kissed me. I kissed him back. It was honey and heaven and starlight. A divine fire spread through me and I felt in that moment I could have melted away into nothingness, a beautiful, utter nothingness.

Oh Honour, what am I to do?

This... this dream. I had it too, or one near enough like it. Is it possible that it could be the same dream? Had she really seen my human face? I remember the realness, the warmth... the feel of her skin on mine.

The last letter is dated only a few days before her departure. Her penmanship is frantic, scrawled and blurred, written in a frenzy.

Honour, I am in agony. I am being torn in two. I miss you all so terribly, but I want to be with Thorn so much. It feels like I am dying. But being with him is not enough. It will never be enough. I want, I want...

And then, there it is. The confirmation, dreaded and desired in equal measure:

I wish he were fully human. I wish our bodies were as mirrored as our minds. I could bear the agony of losing you, my dearest family, if it meant having him completely.

She wanted me. She may have preferred me human, and perhaps, therefore, it might never have been enough, but *she wanted me*.

I misunderstood entirely. The garden didn't start to wilt because her affections were dying, but because she was in turmoil. She wanted me but feared it could never be.

But she was still not coming back.



Days bleed together in an indistinguishable mesh. I am only half-conscious of a change in light. Colour has vanished completely from these walls. Colour, and sound. All has been replaced with a stiffeningly grey silence.

Even Bramble has gone silent, too. He barely moves, doesn't eat even when I try to. I wonder if I'm going to have to watch him die, or if I will go before him.

Please, please don't make me watch. Not that, not again.

I wonder which one of us will be dying alone?

I lean against his back and count the beats of his heart, terrified that soon it will be his last. I cannot bear it. I wrap my arms around his neck and cry into his fur.

"Please," I call out to the fairies, "if you have any way of sparing him, please do it."

A while later, there is the faint tingling of bells. I feel his fur slide away beneath my fingertips, replaced instead with hard stone. He is utterly still.

I assume it is reversible, but will not work on a creature like me. Or perhaps not for long enough.

The solstice is too far away. I will never make it.

Will she truly come again? In a few months, will the gateway open at her behest, and will she creep back into this tomb she once called her home?

What will remain of me, by then? A pile of bones with a rose-shaped stone in my chest? Or something less pleasant?

I don't want to hurt her.

I still want her to come.

Sometimes, when I sleep, I dream of her. I dream she finds me in the gardens and wakes me with a kiss.

Sometimes I dream she's screaming, forbidding me to die.

Other nights I dream she's writing to me, like she's a soldier left for war. Her letters are filled with promises of coming home.

Home, home, home.

I have been sleeping in her bed so long that it no longer smells of her. There is so little of her anywhere, and Bramble is gone.

I pull myself out of the bed. I feel hollow, like there is nothing left of me but this dense, cold pain at my centre. If I was ever whole, I have long since forgotten it.

I need to be close to some part of her. There has to be something left to cling onto.

I climb up the steps towards the roof garden, each step draining more and more of my strength. I can do this. I have to. If it's a struggle to breathe, it just serves as a reminder that I'm not dead, not yet.

Finally, the terrace appears. I pull myself onto the floor and lie there, gathering what remains of my breath. Through a narrow gap in the slanted roofs, I can just make out the meadow. Somewhere, beyond, there she is.

The sky overhead darkens. There is so little daylight left. Why isn't she here yet? My dreams and my reality have become so muddled; didn't she promise me she would come?

One, single red rose remains on the bush above me. I reach out to grab it. The stem is so brittle that it breaks easily in my hand. I hold it to my chest. If I cannot have her beside me as I go, this will do. It will have to.

The pain in my chest is absolute. It spreads through me like wildfire. I am burning, my muscles collapsing, disintegrating, every sinew of me is torn apart. Every touch, every glance, everything she ever said, it all vanishes. It means nothing. The memories fall through me like raindrops; Rose, dancing, Rose in the garden, red-faced and muddy cheeks, Rose singing in the music room, grinning at me the day she learnt to climb, sobbing in my arms, holding me tightly, washing my wounds. Her hands on my cheeks as I lay dying, her beautiful, frantic voice. How can so much mean so little? How can it all have been for naught?

Her little dried bouquets. Her collection of my gifts.

Her words.

"All I could think about was you... if I could even think at all."

"Your soul is shaped like mine."

"You are beautiful."

"I was always lonely, until I met you."

"I don't want to leave you."

No, no. I didn't make all of it up. I couldn't have. She was there in my soul, her heart as willing as mine, as much a part of me as any limb.

Colour begins to vanish. Sounds dribble away. I feel a rumble, far off. I know not what it is.

"Thorn!"

A faint, hard noise. Something is brushing against me. Feather-light. The rose is wrenched from my palm. Somebody kisses my hand.

Is it Mother, come to take me into the hereafter? No, Mother never called me Thorn, and there is something desperate about the pressure against my body, nothing calm and peaceful.

Tiny droplets of water shower my face. They are warm, tingling, like liquid sun. Sensation spreads through me. I feel a prickling pain, hear the rush of the fountain. And a voice. A beautiful, frantic voice.

“Thorn!”

A hand is brushing me, touching my face, kissing my hands.

“No, no, no...” Someone is sobbing. “Wake up, please!”

I feel something slam against my chest. A head. Can it be? Slowly, my eyes pry open. A shining head of red hair greets me.

“Rose,” I whisper, “Am I dreaming still?”

She looks up at me, her eyes studded with tears. “You most certainly are not!” she hisses, her fingers curling into my clothes.

“Am I dead then?”

“Dead? No! You’re as alive as I am!”

If I were dead, she would not be angry. She would not be sad. Which can only mean... I shift up onto my elbows, blinking in disbelief. “You’re... you’re actually here.”

“Clearly,” she swallows breathlessly, brushing tears from her eyes.

“You came back. But, but the gateway—”

It’s not possible. I rise up suddenly, and although the light is nearly all gone, I can still see the mists dissolving. The way is still open. I should be overjoyed, but something niggles at the back of my mind. Who opened it? Why doesn’t it close?

“It isn’t possible,” I mutter. “I didn’t open it—”

“You didn’t?” She frowns. “But then who—”

“What did you do?”

“Me? I just... I just asked it to. Prayed that it would.”

“But... why?”

She opens her mouth to reply, but before she can, my legs give way and we both slide to the floor. I am in her arms again. *Tell me, Rose. Tell me why you came.*

“Careful,” she whispers, after a moment of holding me very tightly. “What... happened here? What’s wrong with you?”

I sigh, inching out of her arms. She is going to be so angry with me. “I told you that a sacrifice was required to open the gate—”

“The flowers.”

“It wasn’t enough. I wasn’t strong enough to open the gate and leave enough magic here to keep her at bay. Within days, almost all the magic was drained from this place.”

“Bramble?”

“The fairies turned him to stone, rather than watch him wither and die like the rest of this place.”

“And... you?”

“I thought you were gone from me forever,” I tell her. *It’s now or never.* “The fairies tried to convince me otherwise, but they went... When... when I lost all hope that you cared for me, my heart broke. That’s a very dangerous thing, for a creature like me.”

Rose swallows. “That’s what Ariel was trying to tell me, wasn’t it?” she asks. “That my leaving, would cost you your life.”

I nod at her. Did she not hear what I just said?

“You are an idiot, you know that, right?” she hisses, her eyes shut tight against the tears. “I would never, ever have gone if you’d told me that—”

“Precisely,” I interrupt. “You would have stayed out of guilt, wasting away for —”

“*Guilt?* You think I’ve come back out of *guilt?*”

“Didn’t you?”

“No, Thorn! I came back because I—”

There is a rumble deep within the castle. Something shatters. The sound claws its way through the stone, splinters through the air. A triumphant scream sears into the sky and the clouds turn dark and cold.

“Oh, oh no...” I pull myself up with great difficulty, Rose still clinging to me. *Not now, not now! What was she going to say?*

“What is it?”

“Moya,” I whisper. “She’s escaped.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight



The Dark Fairy

Lightning splits the sky. The mist turns dark and rolls towards us, flooding the terrace with palpable smog.

I clutch Rose tightly to my chest. “The village,” I rush, “you must escape, warn them—”

“I can’t leave you! She doesn’t want them—”

“On the contrary, she wants everything. Everything that has been denied to her all these years. Your family—”

Rose stiffens in my arms, and her mind goes somewhere. She shakes her head. “No,” she says, “my place is with you.”

“You don’t know what she can do—”

“I know I’m going to stop her.”

“Rose—”

Before I grab hold of her, she’s slithered from my grasp, flying from my side down the stairs. I tumble after her, nearly breaking my bones as I hurtle down the steps. She’s locked the door.

I hear her footsteps disappear down the corridor, my heart along with them.

No, no, *no!*

I hammer against the door, slamming my shoulder against it, but it does not budge. If I was at full strength, maybe, but I'm only a shell of my former self.

Rose cannot take on Moya by herself. What is she thinking? My mother nearly destroyed herself keeping her locked away—

Although, like me, she is unlikely to be at full strength. Her time in the Mirror has undoubtedly drained her.

But Rose is mortal. Brave though she is, she is far from unbreakable. Her will is not enough.

Moya will tear her apart.

No!

I groan against the wood. I'll scratch it to splinters, if I must.

I never had the chance to tell her that I loved her.

No, I had the chance. I just didn't use it. Like her, I have been too afraid. And now... now we have run out of chances, opportunities.

No. Not yet.

I won't let her die. Not for me, not for anyone. I will get her out of here. I will do whatever it takes to keep her safe, to keep her family safe—

And if it's the last thing I ever do, I am going to tell her that I love her.

I run back up to the fountain and guzzle the waters, hoping some magic clings to it still. A warmth reaches me. A faint restorative.

Something sounds in the distance. Steel. A gunshot.

I freeze. None of Moya's followers would use muskets. What is going on? I can see nothing, the gardens thick and dark.

I hurtle back down the stairs and pound against the door, begging it to open. It budes, slightly. *Come on, come on—*

Something clicks against the lock. A bright, tiny spark races through it. It nuzzles my cheek.

"Ophelia?"

It's her. Smaller and fainter, voiceless, but here. There is still good magic. There is still Rose. There must be hope there, too.

I topple into the corridor, narrowly missing a club as it crashes over my head. I roll out of reach, skittering backwards. My hair stands on end.

An ogre. A large, monstrous, misshapen creature. It makes another lunge for me. I dart backwards, tearing a tapestry from the wall and throwing it at its face. I'm slower than I'd like. Too slow.

And this isn't the best place to fight it.

Another fairy—Margaret, I think—drops a vase on its head. It rears backwards, falling into a side table, giving me enough time to scoot down the stairs and into a bigger room. The castle is alive with noises.

Who is fighting?

Where is Ariel?

Where is *Rose*?

A bolt strikes the plaster. I glance left and see a villager with a loaded crossbow, aiming at me.

"Wait—" I say, ducking behind a table.

The villager stills. He's tall, fair-haired, vaguely familiar. A friend of Rose's? I must have seen him in the mirrors. "You... you can speak?"

"Yes," I say, keeping to my spot, "and—"

Before I can finish my sentence, the ogre smashes into the room. Its club comes crashing towards the villager. I bolt from my spot, meeting the weapon and

wrenching it from its grasp. That hardly stops it. It raises its fist in the same fashion. I drop to the floor, letting it strike the wall behind, and slice upwards with my claws. I can't make myself go deep, but it roars.

The villager shoots it in the back. It slumps forward, toppling into me. Ophelia and Margaret tug me free.

"Thanks," I say to both them, and the villager.

He stares at me. "I'm looking for a girl. Umm, human. Red hair?"

"Rose," I say, "you've not seen her?"

"Ah, no. You... you aren't going to attack me?"

I sag against the wall. "Not sure I could if I wanted to."

"Are you... are you injured?"

"Not... not quite..."

Something crashes in the throne room. A long, loud scream. His eyes widen. "I should..." he says, halfway out the door. He comes back to my side and hands me his flask. "It's just liquid courage, but it's better than nothing."

"Thank... thank you."

"I'm Charles, by the way. Rose's brother-in-law. I think... maybe you should just sit tight? I'll come and find you when this is all over."

He pats me on the shoulder, and is out of the room before I can tell him that I can't sit tight. Not until I find Rose.

I drink the contents of the flask, toss it aside, and struggle to my feet. Ophelia and Margaret bat around my chest, but I wave them away. I use the servant's staircase and half-crawl to the Hall of Mirrors. Moya's frame is empty. There is no sign of Rose, just shards of glass and deconstructed suits of armour. If Rose was here, she's not now. And there's no blood, which means she isn't hurt.

Which means she's probably fighting.

I race as fast as I can back down to the throne room. Most of the villagers and monsters have abandoned it, faint outlines of frays dotted throughout the garden, illuminated by burning bushes. Ophelia and Margaret race out to join them.

I do not. In the corner of the room stands a wendigo. It is at least eight feet tall, broad as a bear, with arms so long they almost graze the floor. Despite the width of its shoulders, it is skeletal, each and every one of its bones pushing out against its ash-grey skin. It emits a horrible smell of decaying flesh.

It charges towards something, and only then do I spot Rose, blade and hair blazing, racing to meet it.

I tear forwards, slamming into its side and knocking it clean against a pillar.

"Thorn!" Rose screams my name, but the monster is up again in no time. I climb to my feet, circling round it, trying to judge its next move.

The wendigo raises its arms, and I meet them with mine, straining under pressure. My feet slide against the marble. It is going to crush me.

Rose skids between us, sword overhead, and slices the monster's belly. Black blood spurts across the floor. It howls, releasing me and darting backwards to assess its injuries. It is merely a flesh wound.

My breath is tight in my throat, but I clamber upright before Rose can reach me, panting hard. I need to end this. *We* need to end this.

And do what? Let the villagers fight off Moya alone? I've just met Rose's brother-in-law. Who else is here? Her friends? Her brother?

I doubt she'll leave them to fight.

Not even for me.

Maybe, for me.

The monster readies itself again, but I'm faster. I leap into the air, soaring over its head, and grab it by the throat. It struggles in my grip, clawing at my face, but before it can do any real damage Rose plunges her sword under its exposed ribcage.

There is a gush as Rose tugs the weapon free, a thud as I drop it. It lies there, jerking and bleeding, while Rose and I stare at each other, trying to catch our breath.

In a moment, I'm going to take her in my arms, and never let go.

In a moment, when I can speak, I'm going to finally tell her.

In a moment—

Something sharp slices through my side. I grunt, looking down. A bolt is sticking out my middle.

"No!"

I slump into Rose's arms, sending both of us to the floor. She holds me, and I cannot work out which one of us is shaking the most. The pain is liquifying, cold. I can barely feel her.

Rose stares at the doors, where a man with dark red hair is standing with a crossbow.

Her brother. Freedom.

"What have you done?" she shrieks, her voice like glass.

Freedom steps into the room, his eyes wide. "He was... he was attacking you!"

"He would never—"

"Rose..." I manage.

"He... he can talk."

"Of course he can talk!" Rose snaps at him. She turns away, taking my hand, lacing her fingers into mine.

"But, but he's a..."

"He's *mine*." Rose shoots Freedom a look almost as deadly as an arrow.

He stands there, utterly perplexed. "I didn't... I didn't know. How could I? I—"

"Leave us alone."

"I'm... I'm sorry—"

"Go away!"

I squeeze Rose's hand. "I'm all right," I tell her. "Just a flesh wound, I'm sure."

Tears run freely down her face. "You always say you're fine when you're not."

"So do you."

"Well, I'm not all right now."

Freedom crouches down, gingerly examining the wound in my side, not quite touching me. I don't think he's afraid of what I am. I think he's more afraid of what his sister might do. "I might... I might be able to fix that."

I look at him, and he meets my gaze. I think we both know that we're lying.

And I think I need, once more, to let Rose go. If I'm to die, Moya cannot live. Someone needs to face her. And the villagers don't know what she is.

I turn back to Rose. "Moya?"

"She's bleeding," she rushes, as if this vital piece of information is unimportant right now. "I think that maybe—"

I nod, understanding. "Her time in the mirror... it has weakened her."

"The others are fighting her—"

"It may not be enough." I take a deep breath. Pain splits through my side. I can't hide it. Rose's fingers tighten in mine. "But perhaps... the mirror." With a single glance, I know she has understood. "You know what to do?"

"I think so, but—"

"Go, Rose. You have to. It might be the only way."

"But—"

"I'll wait for you."

Rose pauses for a moment, as if she cannot imagine being wrenched from my side, as if she wants to argue, but she closes her eyes instead, and kisses my forehead fervently. We shut out the world for a second.

"I'll take care of him," Freedom insists, trying, no doubt, to make up for his terrible error in judgement.

"You better," Rose says. "If he dies, I die."

Then she is out the door, and I am alone once more. Pain crackles in my side. It is deep and clean, and seems to spread through the rest of me. I have never felt a wound like this before.

Ariel appears, lying against my chest, trembling quietly. Where did she come from?

I turn my face towards her brother. "Did you lie to her?" I ask.

Freedom's face is grave. "I'm not sure," he says. His voice is very steady, but his pause speaks volumes.

"You're a poor liar," I tell him. "You're not like her. You cannot hide your thoughts so well."

"She's always been very good at that," he admits. "Unless she's punching you, in which case it's very easy to see how she truly feels. I don't know how you've coped, being trapped here with her for so long."

"It hasn't... been easy..."

Freedom bends down to inspect the wound. He takes out a handkerchief and wraps it around the bolt, but does nothing else. There is nothing else to do.

"So, you must be the one she was talking about," he says, far too cheerfully.

"She told you about me?"

"She may have left out a couple of details..."

I knew she must have told at least Honour from looking in the Mirror, but I'm surprised she told everyone. Rose told her family about me, even when I lied to her, kept her here. It's a small joy now, but I will take it.

"She spoke about you a great deal, when she was here," I tell him.

Freedom takes off his cloak and covers me with it. I can barely feel it. "I bet."

"She loves you."

He swallows audibly. "Maybe not after today."

"You... you didn't know..."

"I was being reckless."

"You were protecting your sister. She... she'll understand... in time..." My eyelids feel heavy. The pain in my side seems less now. I'm not sure that's a good thing.

"Whoa, whoa!" Freedom's hand is on my shoulder. "Don't go anywhere."

"I... I can't. I have to... I have to wait..." I have to wait for her to come back. I have to see her, one last time. But I could live a thousand years, and see her every day, and still not have drunk my fill. *Please, I pray, let there be an afterlife. Let me take all of her with me. Do not erase my memories from this world. My heaven is her.*

"You love her," says Freedom.

A few minutes ago, he thought I was a monster, but there is no judgement in his face now, no disapproval. Only guilt.

"More than anything, on any world."

“She loves you too, you know. Any fool can see it. Any fool that knows her, anyway.”

I know it. For the first time, I absolutely, undeniably, believe it. She came back for me.

I’m sorry, Rose, for going first.

I wish I could have heard you say it.

There is still time.

I didn't tell her, either. Not precisely, not with so few words.

A darkness flickers in my vision, and I fold into it.



“No, no! You must hang on!”

Rose? No, not Rose, Grace. Grace standing in front of me, screaming. Where am I? I am in some strange, white world, beneath the foot of an exquisite tree. The air crackles with gold.

“Grace?”

“You shouldn’t be here.”

“Am I... dead?”

“Not quite, you fool, but you’re nearly there. More so than the last time.”

There is screaming not far off. A flash of shadow in this silvery world.

“Rose,” I say suddenly.

Grace sighs. “She’s fine,” she says shortly. “Or she will be. But she won’t be, if you’re not there when she returns to you.”

“Grace—”

“You have to save her!”

“I’m not sure I can. Your son sort of... shot me.”

“Yes, and he’s a terrible boy and I’m sure he’s very sorry, but I don’t mean like that! You have to... you have to save her from... from being the person she was before she knew you! From being herself again without you!”

“I—”

“You don’t know what she was like before, how lonely she was. You don’t realise what you are to her, what she’ll be if you should die. She won’t ever recover. She’ll be a shell of herself and nothing, no one, will ever draw her out again. Please, I’m begging you, return to her.”

I want to. I want to more than I have ever wanted anything ever before in my life. I think of her in the rose garden, of what she was about to say. I think of her hissing at Freedom, “he’s *mine*.”

“She loves you, Thorn.”

The whiteness starts to dissolve, the edges crisping like paper in a fire. It gives way to a new, deeper darkness. I am hovering over the gardens. Several of the trees are alight, their leaves spasming frantically against the cruel, black night, their skeletal branches twitching. Ophelia and Margaret move among them, trying to expunge the flames, redirecting them at the scores of Moya’s followers tearing up the earth.

Moya is raising hell on the bank, purple robes swirling like smoke, her gaunt, pale face lit up by the lightning crackling from her fingertips. She is surrounded by her supporters, withered, stout, pale, grey shadowy creatures, and a few fairies whose skin has turned to charcoal, whose faces are as twisted as hers had become. She is utterly unlike my mother who she once resembled so keenly.

Statues fight at her behest as well, but they crumble more easily than the others. Helmets and breastplates litter the shoreline, slivers of silver in the shallows.

Her cheek is bleeding heavily, far more than it should be. She looks dishevelled, but her appearance only adds to her madness. It is hard to tell if she is mad with power or mad with exhaustion. Her hair is all over the place, her eyes white and wild.

She looks up, and I see Rose approaching.

“What a lovely little welcome party you’ve brought me, my beauty!” she cackles. Her voice is like ice. I am a boy again, facing her in the mirror. The monster under my bed. “I am sure they will make welcome additions to my army!”

She grabs a fistful of blue energy in her palm and tosses it at a tall, broad-shouldered man. It hits him squarely in the chest and he falls into the shallows. Rose plunges after him, pulling him to the surface. He splutters and coughs and then pushes her away. His eyes are not his own.

“James—”

He raises his sword towards Rose, but it misses and he falls into the water. She grabs the back of his shirt, wrenching him towards the bank. His hand dives for his weapon, but she hits him with the back of her hand.

Good punch.

He spits blood in the sand. “R-Rose?”

Rose turns back to Moya. Her expression drops.

“Magic not working as well as it used to?” Rose smirks.

Brave, bold, beautiful creature.

Moya glares. She claps her hands, and the entire garden is engulfed in a thick, tangible darkness.

“The lake!” Rose screams to the rest of the villagers. “Get in the lake!”

It’s smart thinking. It will be harder for Moya to find them there. She won’t be able to sense their movements as much. They’ll be able to hide, even if she can see through this smog as well.

And Rose does not need to see. This is her home. She knows it in any light. I watch, able, somehow, to see her through the dark as well, as she clambers into a tree—one we’ve climbed, so many times before.

There is a scramble in the water. Crying, shouting, flailing.

Gradually, eventually, visibility returns. The gardens have been transformed into a wasteland, a battleground. The trees lying in flaming, crumpled heaps. The statues have been chewed up. Between the ruin of the landscape and the decimation of the shore, bodies are piled. Our home is barely recognisable.

And there are bodies everywhere. Goblins, trolls, fairy, human... it is impossible to tell.

Where are the rest of the villagers? There’s nothing in the water. Not a splash, not a glimmer—

But a dozen heads rise to the surface, weeds crawling up their necks. They are completely trapped.

“Where are you, little beauty?” Moya croons. “Come out. You cannot hide forever. I’ll burn this place to the ground, eventually. Burning to death is not pleasant, so I hear. I can give you a quicker death than that. I’ll even let you see your beloved beast again.”

I watch Rose clench. *No. Don’t listen to her.*

“Although, I notice he is mysteriously absent from our little soiree. Could it be that the dear old beast isn’t even with us any more? I tell you what, beauty. Surrender yourself to me, and I will let your friends live. I might even spare the

whole village. What is one little village when the world will be mine? You still have a family, don't you?"

Rose keeps to her hiding place, her face contorted in pain and rage.

"I see, I see. How about this? I will even spare *him*, if he still lives. I have no need of the boy's destruction now that I am free. You, on the other hand, you are far too troublesome. But if I can save him, I will. Fairy's promise."

"No—" I yell out, although she cannot hear me. "Don't you dare, Rose. Don't even think about it. You wouldn't be saving me, you'd be condemning me. Do not force me to stay in a world without you in it!"

There is a flicker across her face, almost as if she has heard me. Perhaps she doesn't need to hear me. Perhaps she already knows.

She leaps out of the tree and plunges a shard of mirror into Moya's back. Moya tosses her into the shallows, cackling as blood fills her mouth. She spits it onto the stones, reaching round to pull the shard from her flesh.

"This little shard... did you think... that this could contain me? Did you see the last prison that was built for me?"

She tosses it into the water. Rose dives after it, but a hand fastens around her ankle and yanks her back to the bank. Weeds wrap around my feet. Moya towers over her, grabbing her fists.

I cannot breathe. I'm going to watch Moya kill her.

I'm sorry, Rose, I whisper inwardly. I'll be with you soon.

Maybe I already am.

"What a sad attempt, beauty," Moya grins. "Much like your attempt to love that silly creature."

Rose glares at her, her eyes like poison.

"No last words?"

Moya releases one of Rose's hands, moving to grab a fallen weapon. She has run out of magic, her energy as low as it ever has been. "How about these ones?" she laughs. "*True love will never set you free—*"

Rose's free hand reaches into her apron pocket and draws out another shard of mirror. I know, somehow, which one it belongs to. It's not Moya's. It's the Mirror of Truth.

Rose plunges it into Moya's chest.

For one long, awful minute, she just stands there, still, her sword in her hand... then she turns her face towards the shard of mirror resting against her heart.

"See what you really are," Rose hisses, the bonds around her feet shrivelling away. The villagers are dropped into the water. Moya's remaining supporters freeze, paralysed. "You are darkness, and dust, and poison," she says, rising above her.

Moya's white face begins to crumple. Her whole body seems to cave in, twitching like a spider in the flame. The clouds begin to part.

"Try surviving in the light."

In a flash, she is gone. Her supporters vanish into shadow. The skies open, the rain begins to pour. All fires are extinguished. Rose barely spares a glance at her friends before hurtling back to the castle.

Back to me.



I awake beside Freedom, the fairies hovering above me. He breathes a sharp gasp of relief.

"I thought you'd gone there," he says.

"Your mother wouldn't let me."

"What?"

Before I can explain, Rose bursts into the hall. She is scratched beyond measure, her clothes torn and ragged, dripping wet and filthy but alive and unhurt and wonderful. She is alive. She will live.

Relief washes over me, and for a second, I believe everything will be fine, now. Nothing is wrong with a world with her in it.

But I am going to leave it, and I have never wanted to stay more.

She is screaming at her brother. Why is she wasting our time, yelling at him? I need her here, need to finish telling her—

I call her name, and she is with me in an instant, her hand on mine. I try to grip her as she kisses my hand. If I hold on tightly enough, she can keep me here. I will not leave her.

"I was afraid... I would go... before you returned."

"Never," she assures me. She strokes my cheek, and her touch sends soft shivers through me. She will never know what it feels like to be so near to her. I will never know what it feels like to touch her as a human.

She babbles something about defeating Moya, rushes it, like it's hardly important at all. I tell her I am glad, but my voice doesn't feel like my own. Her face contorts when I speak, like a physical wound. She whispers my name like a prayer.

"Speaking of terrible relatives," I continue, wincing under the weight of the arrow, "Your brother has impeccable aim..."

"Free—"

"Forgive him, Rose. He did not know... what I am..."

She leans forward, gripping me ever more tightly. There are only inches between us, no space at all. "I have always known," she says, like it's the most important thing in the world.

I summon the strength to reach up and stroke her hair. "Bring him here. Bring your family. The castle is yours. Use it however you will."

"I won't... I *can't*... not without you. This is *our* home, do you hear? Yours and mine..."

Our home. She cannot know the pleasure those words bring me. Our home. Hers, mine. All that is mine belongs to her. Everything that I am. "I am glad to hear you say that."

Pain rakes through me, but it feels filtered, like it is coming from somewhere else, far away. I feel light-headed.

"Thorn, you don't have permission to die, remember? I won't let you. I refuse."

"Thank you..."

Her fingers graze against my temple, and I move slightly under her touch, drawn to it, part of it. I want to be closer to her.

"What for?" her voice sounds like glass, broken, breakable.

"For wanting me."

She opens her mouth, shakes her head, and her tears slide out freely now. She looks furious. "*Wanting* you? Of course you are wanted. How can you even... how can you even suggest otherwise? Do you not realise what you are? I need you, Thorn. I need you to stay with me. I just... I just got you back. We're ready for our happy ending."

“Could there... ever have been... a happy ending... for us?” She is so close to me now. I can see her face shimmering above me, glistening with tears. I feel them splash my eyes, like summer rain. Each one is a diamond, a precious jewel of her emotion.

“Any ending when I am with you is happy.”

I wind my fingers through her hair, press my palm against her cheek with all the strength I have. She wants me. Even as I am, she wants me, will be happy with me. She is all I need, all I cannot lose.

Our moments left are fragile and thinning, but there is one thing I must do.

“I love you, Rose,” I whisper, my eyes fixed onto hers. I am not afraid of seeing her reaction, not any more. I know, I know she feels the same. Even when she says nothing but grips me tighter, I know. There is no revulsion in her, there never was. She has loved me almost as long as I have loved her.

It would have been nice to hear her say it, though...

“I have always, always... *Rose...*” My voice falls away from me. I try to speak again, but I can’t, there aren’t words. My mouth moves silently. My body stiffens—

If those are my last words, I could not have chosen better. I love you, I love you...

Rose is on my chest. I can just about feel her, just about catch glimpses of her clutching at me, holding me, trying to keep me here. She doesn’t want me to go. I can feel her, pouring out of her body, pouring into me. It is the realest, most tangible thing. Her soul is crawling into mine. She will not let me go.

“I love you, Thorn. I love you. I love...”

Her voice catches, cannot go any further. I gaze up at her and want to smile, want to offer her words of comfort, want to repeat her sentiment, but there is nothing any more.

She loves me.

There is that, and that is the only thing in the world.



Lightness floods through me. I am suspended in a bubble in a land of white and gold and cloud and utter silence. I can’t feel anything but nothingness, nothingness, and Rose’s words. They fill me like liquid.

I love you, Thorn.

For a moment, we had everything. I hope, wherever I am going, I can still see her. I hope we meet again.

No, no, this is wrong. Where am I going? I should be with her. I can’t leave her to face the world alone. I have to go back—

I slam against a non-existent floor. A face hovers over me. Grace. She is beaming.

“What are you so happy about?”

“I told you she loved you.”

“It matters not, if I am dead! I cannot leave her—”

“You’re right,” she says, matter-of-factly. “You can’t. She’ll be furious. Better get back.”

“But how—”

Grace leans down and kisses my cheek. “Goodbye, dear beast. We shall not see each other again, I feel. Not for a very long time. Take care of each other.”

The soft ghost of her lips spreads through my skin. I place a hand to my cheek—it is smooth. The hands in front of me are... human hands. And I feel them. Feel

them in a way I have never done before. It cannot be.

Grace's face fades away, and another stands before me. Just as beautiful, more so. A face I have long dreamed of seeing in the flesh, feared gone forever—

"Mother?"

Tears run in waterfalls down her face, but she is smiling through it all. "Hello, dear," she touches my cheek. Unbelievable, incredible warmth spreads through me. "You've grown."

All at once we are one again. I am in her arms in a way I cannot ever remember being, and she is sobbing, and kissing me, over and over and over. I cannot move. I'm going to burst. Behind her, I see the fairies crying too. Whole, alive, brought back by the sheer radiance of mother's magic. Margaret is trying not to sob too loudly, but Ophelia has buried herself in her waist. Ariel's smile is made of a thousand tears, and beside her...

Rose is standing, Freedom's hands digging into her shoulders. Her hands are clasped around her mouth in complete and utter shock.

Finally, Mother releases me. She looks back at our audience, back at Rose.

"Thank you," she whispers, "for saving my son."

Rose's hands finally fall away. She could be horrified, or overjoyed, or furious, it is impossible to tell.

"Rose—" I start. I try to get up, but before I can do any more than lift my arms, Rose has launched herself into me. Her hands are around my back, her breath at my neck. It is just as well I am already on the floor. Her touch liquefies every muscle. Her skin sings against mine. I whisper her name, but she tells me not to speak. Her hands travel up towards my face. She stares at me with breathless wonder, with the same look I have always felt I have given her.

I wind my fingers into her hair. It is just as soft as I imagined it, and when I slide my hand around her waist, she moves under my touch in such a way that it sends shivers down my spine. It is as if I have gained another sense. I never knew it was possible to feel this way.

I do not know who moves first, but within seconds our mouths collide and my insides ignite. It is blissful, burning, wondrous. Fire shoots across my belly. It cannot always feel this way. We'll destroy each other. Her touch spreads through me like wildfire. I am trembling. I cannot contain the weight of this moment. I am going to split apart. *We* will split apart, shoot across the sky like a star. It is too much, I think, far too much, but when she stops for a second to gather her breath I feel like I will drown without her lips on mine.

This is really going to take some getting used to.

I do not want to part, but at some point, we both need to breathe. I cannot really exist on her alone. Her hands do not leave my face. We are both laughing deliriously.

"I probably owe you an explanation," I tell her.

"It can wait," she says simply, and then kisses me again.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



Two Hearts

“When my son was little more than a babe, my sister placed a powerful curse on him, transforming him into a beast,” my mother explains. “She hoped, I’ve no doubt, that I would slay him myself, not seeing him for what he was. But, much like you, I saw him from the start. Despite how wild he was. A mindless creature, at first. Her magic was so strong that even I could not undo it. I managed to soften the curse, bringing back his mind, save for one night every month when dark magic was at its peak. I searched desperately for a cure and finally, Moya gave me one: my son would be restored when a true beauty, fierce in soul and fair of heart, could love him for who he truly was. However, if he loved her, and she left him and broke his heart, he would surely perish.”

“And that would be the end of every drop of good magic here,” I add. My voice sounds different, less rough. Still mine. “Any magic containing Moya would snap. She would be free again.”

“It would have broken my heart, too,” Mother says softly, her eyes still on me. “I could not have kept her away from a world without you in it.”

Rose stares at me, her cheeks bright. “But... I did leave you.”

"It took a little while for me to lose all hope," I explain. "I saw you in the mirror. I dreamt of you, and dared to dream that you desired to return. That hope kept me alive for a little longer, but it could never have lasted until the next solstice."

"But... it says you just have to find someone who loves you. I have loved you for a long time!"

My chest warms. I was not sure that was the case. It still seems ludicrous that I love her, and she loves me. *She loves me*. "Apparently, you had to say it."

"I *did* say it!" Rose retorts. "Just not... to you. Or in so few words. And in any case, you didn't say anything either!"

"I did! Just in more words than you!"

"Well, I wasn't going to say it first!"

"I asked you to marry me, Rose!"

"You didn't say it was because you loved me!"

"It was implied!"

"You should say you love someone before you marry them. It's rather integral to the whole business."

I hear Ariel tutting behind me, nodding approvingly at Rose's words. Margaret and Ophelia are beside her. All whole. Ophelia's wings flicker with nervous energy. A minute later, Bramble comes splintering down the stairs. He crashes into me and licks us fervently. We squeeze him between the two of us, the three of us together again.

"What's your real name?" Rose asks me. It's probably about time she knew it.

I grin sheepishly. It seems strange to say it. *Thorn* is my real name. "Keane. Not that anyone other than Mother ever really used it. It never quite suited."

"It means handsome, in our language," Mother explains.

"Of course it does."

"But I really do prefer Thorn."

Rose looks up at me, her eyes swallowing every new feature. The look of stark amazement on her face is utterly bewitching.

"Why did you not tell me who—what—you really were?"

"It would not have helped. If I had told you the truth—"

"I would have—"

"You would have pitied me. You cannot love through pity. I have told others, before. They tried, oh, they tried so hard, but knowing what they knew, they were trying to love me for who I could be, and not who I was." I place a hand against her cheek. It's like warm silk. I'll never get used to it. "I could not risk that with you."

"This is your secret, I take it?" she asks. "Just to be sure. There's nothing else?"

I laugh. "No, this is it. No more secrets, I assure you."

Mother touches my shoulder. "There are a few things you and I need to discuss."

As much as I don't want to be apart from Rose, not right now, not after everything, Mother is right. And I want to be with her, too. My first memory of being held by her comes from a few minutes ago. I'm eager for another.

I keep my eyes on Rose as Mother leads me away, smiling nervously. We have a lot to discuss too.

Mother sweeps me into the parlour, not even troubling to close the door, and launches herself at me again.

"My boy," she whispers, "my baby."

I collapse into her arms, and we slide to the floor, the tears spilling out of us furiously.

After a while, I find something resembling a voice. "I thought you were dead."

"I nearly was. Everything that I was was tied up in keeping Moya at bay, keeping the place alive, just a little longer..."

"And opening the gateway, right?" I ask. "It was you that let Rose back in."

"Yes," she nods, still clutching onto me. I've slid down to her middle and am resting against her lap. I never remember being held this way by her as a baby, but it feels right.

"And... the first time, too? You lured Rose here in the first place."

"Yes." She swallows. "Do you blame me?"

"She might."

She smiles. "I doubt that. I doubt that very much." She climbs to her feet, pulling me upright. "About Rose, dearheart—"

"Please, Mother, don't say anything about her not being royal, because—"

"I like her."

"Oh. Good. Because I was just about to demand you turn me back into a beast. I have no intention of being human without her."

"I like her," says Mother more fervently, "and I look forward to getting to know her better. Although, I think I should leave the two of you alone for a while."

"Alone? Mother, where will you go—"

"I wish to search for the remainder of our court, the ones I cast out to protect. If any still live, I would have them return, if they wish."

I am not anxious to have her disappear again, however much I might fill that time with Rose. But I doubt she will be leaving immediately. We still have time. We'll have *years* in which to get to know each other again.

"I... I never thanked you," I start. It seems the most important thing. "I never even *wanted* to thank you, not till now. For what you did. What you sacrificed to save me."

She touches my cheek. "A mother will do anything to save her child." She looks behind me, and I see Rose waiting by the door. My heart thumps just looking at her, like she's the one that's been transformed. Perhaps she has. She is no longer this torturous goddess, but a real, living creature who *wants to be with me*.

"Go and clean yourself up," Mother suggests. "I should like to talk with Rose for a moment."

"Please don't frighten her off."

"She is not one to scare easily."

I leave the room, stopping briefly at the threshold to brush the back of my hand against Rose's. Her warmth ripples into me, and I feel giddy and nervous in a new, exciting way.

Before either of us can utter a word, Ophelia comes flying straight down the corridor, accompanied by Margaret and Ariel. They drag me away to my bedroom and fold me into one giant embrace, kissing my cheeks and ruffling my hair. All of them are crying profusely. None more than Ariel.

"I really... thought... you were... dead..." she sobs. "I hate you... so much..."

"I love you too, Ariel," I say, bringing her back against my chest. She seems strangely small to me.

Margaret pinches my cheeks. "I told you it would turn out all right in the end, didn't I?"

"I should never have doubted you."

“Good,” she says, and her grip on my cheek becomes tighter. “Never do so again.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’m going to run you a bath,” Ophelia chirps. “You’re filthy.”

“I’m going to find you some new clothes,” says Ariel. “These rags are falling off you.”

“Come, ladies.” Margaret claps her hands. “Let’s make him a prince.”



I cannot tell you precisely what happens during the rest of the day; minutes and hours pass in a blur, short on substance but long in length. The castle is swept and tidied and primped, food is laid out in the old-fashioned way, though I have no appetite for it. Murmurs of preparing it for guests flutter about. I see so little of Rose during this time, and the fairies seemed to have multiplied, appearing everywhere all at once and creating a bustling hive of energy. I grow tired. I long for the solace of our empty castle, and realise, with odd longing, that it will never be empty again.

Mother eventually steals me away to my bedroom. We talk for a long, long time, and finally she drifts off. Margaret comes in to remove her crown and shoes, to tuck her up and keep her company in case she wakes.

“She’ll have some adjusting to do,” she warns me. “But we’ll help her, have no fear.”

Ariel appears in the doorway, winking. “Want me to make you up a bed elsewhere?”

I’m not sure what to say to that, but I know I have no chance of sleeping just yet. Margaret, as if reading my thoughts, narrows her eyes.

“Come, I’ll be your chaperone,” says Ariel, linking our arms together. “I’ll make sure nothing untoward happens.”

“I doubt that,” Margaret tuts, but she does not stop us. Bramble, who has been diligently beside me all evening, slips out with me. I ruffle his head but I’m not sure I really want him coming to visit Rose with me. Not tonight.

Ariel walks me almost as far as Rose’s door, and slows to a halt. “All right,” she says, “this may seem *completely* irrelevant, but I’ve not had a body in a very long time so... I’m just putting this out there. I know he shot you, but would you be all right with me *maybe* having a bit of a thing for Rose’s brother?”

I blink at her incredulously. “You just met.”

“Yes, but he’s *really* pretty. And he’s all tough and brave... and he paints! I love artists.”

“I don’t have a problem with him shooting me,” I say. “Rose might.”

“Ah, she’ll come around.” Bramble nudges her hand, and she bends down to pet him. “You’re a good boy, aren’t you? You know, when you and Rose first adopted a wolf, I did not think it was going to end well, but he is very sweet, I grant you.”

I pause. “I’m sorry, a wolf?”

Ariel sighs, half-laughing. “You and Rose are such idiots. Perfect for one another.” She slaps my rear, causing me to jump, and kisses my cheek. “Be good, Prince. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“I’m not sure that limits my options.”

“Well, precisely,” she says, halfway down the corridor, tugging Bramble along with her. “Good luck!”

I pause outside Rose's room, straightening myself up, as if Rose hasn't made it perfectly clear she cares not one jot for my appearance. I knock on her door, and then, feeling unusually bold, slip inside before she has a chance to reply. She's dressed for bed in a white nightgown, but she looks wide awake. I step towards her and she leaps up with such force that it knocks me into the wall.

"Careful," I whisper, letting out something like a groan, "I'm struggling with my balance slightly. I have to admit, I'm missing the tail."

Rose grins up at me, her smile liquefying my insides. "Does it feel right though, this body?"

I slide my hand across her shoulder, stopping right before her night-dress begins. My flesh trembles beneath hers. "Like everything I imagined and more."

Our lips are together again, and my skin explodes under the sensation of hers. We wheel around, and end up in the chair beside the hearth. Rose is on my lap, slotted against me, her limbs tangled up in mine. Her hands are on my arms, my back, my neck, my face. Entwined in my hair. I wanted a thousand more ways to touch her, to gather her into me. I cannot pull her close enough, taste her as deeply as I want to. How can drowning feel so divine?

When we do finally pull back, breathless and giddy, she runs her fingers over my features, like a child learning a new shape. She curls her fingers back into my hair and kisses me some more, while I explore the inches of her uncovered skin with new skill. Touch is magnificent.

For minutes, moments, hours, we sit in perfect silence, breaking only to giggle. For a long while it feels like we have nothing to say. She strokes the smoothness of my chin while my fingers play with her hair. It's like red satin.

"Better?" I ask.

"I almost miss the hair."

I laugh. "I suppose I could grow a beard."

She tugs on the tiny cleft in my chin. "I don't know. I like you this way, too."

"You are so difficult to please."

She presses the tips of her fingers to my lips, and my palm brushes her cheek. Neither one of us dares look away.

"I like you this way, too," I tell her.

She tilts her head, catching my hand against her shoulder. "What way?"

"All the ways." My mouth twitches into a crooked smile. I lean down and kiss her with it, just briefly, eyes open, not wanting to look away.

Her hands return to my features. "If all that it took to break the spell was for me to say I loved you, why would you not say it first?"

"I didn't know you had to say it," I explain. "All the curse said was that I had to find someone to love me. I didn't know if she just had to fall for me, act on those feelings, or announce them. Ariel suspected that the latter was the case, but we couldn't be sure. I convinced myself that whatever you felt for me, it didn't quite match the level of my affections. I mean, I hoped, desperately. You gave me plenty of reason to hope. Your desire to return if you ever left, your insistence that you wouldn't forget me... when you lost your chance to go home to save me. But I thought your feelings might have strayed into the realm of familial. Whenever I questioned you about them, you seemed to suggest that anyone would have done what you did. I thought perhaps that, although you cared for me, your actions were motivated by morals rather than love. Then... the gardens started to die. I knew that somehow they were tied up in your feelings, and I took it as a sign. Either you didn't love me, you had fallen out of love with me, or you didn't love me enough."

Rose looks down, shame stark across her face. "You still should have told me," she says quietly.

I groan. "I did, Rose! At least, I tried—"

"Well, you did an appalling job—"

"Did you not *hear* my poem—"

"Had you actually said it, of course I would have said it back—"

"I didn't know that!"

"How could you not know that? It practically sung from my skin."

No, it didn't, you beautiful oyster. Not always. Not often. Not often enough that I could truly be sure.

I sigh. "I hoped, Rose. I really did. I so desperately wanted to tell you, but I was... afraid. Afraid in the way a normal, mortal man would have been."

"Well," she says softly, playing with the folds of my shirt, "I can understand that. I was terrified in a normal, mortal way too. It had so little to do with you being a beast, and so much to do with me being afraid of the hurt."

"I would never hurt you." Doesn't she know this by now?

"You would if you died," she says, her voice a trembling whisper. "Which, by the way, you come close to a lot. No more of that, please."

"I will do my very best."

She lies down against my chest, and stays there silently for quite some time. I think about what Grace said, about Rose being afraid of suffering like her father. She was afraid to love me because she was afraid to lose me.

"When... did you fall in love with me?" she asks quietly.

I smile, my heart beating a little faster. "I cannot put a time or date to it. But early, very early. I was quite taken when you didn't scream at me."

"Be serious!"

"I am. I may look quite the dashing fellow now—"

"You have *always* been a dashing fellow—"

"And I would hate to be accused of having low standards, but I do prefer it when my prospective companion does not scream in terror at the sight of me."

She snickers at my dripping tone, and snuggles back against me.

"Your laugh," I say softly.

"What?"

"I loved the first time you laughed at me, when I teased you about your snort. My life has not had much laughter in it, and I saw a different side to you then. But I knew I truly loved you the night after you tried to take down a pack of wolves for me. I dared to dream, then, that you cared for me. I never stopped dreaming, after that night. You were my salvation and my doom, and every day afterwards was an ecstasy of agony, wondering which you would be."

"I knew I loved you when I thought that you were going to die," she whispers, and then clarifies. "The first time, when I stayed. I knew then. But I loved you that day before, down by the lake. I loved you the night on the rooftop, when I almost fell asleep in your arms. I loved you when we made music together, when I fell from the tree, and didn't want to move. I think I even loved you that first day in the roof garden, when you wanted to kiss me, because I wanted to kiss you too."

A blissful heat stutters in my chest. I lean across and kiss her again, keeping my mouth on her even when I speak. "Say that again."

"Um... I wanted to kiss you too."

"No," I whisper, "just the part when..."

"Oh," she says, "oh. I love you."

I kiss her neck. "Again."

“I love you. I love you, I love you...”

Firelight dances around the chamber and flames give way to ashes. Outside, the wind howls, and the rains come crashing down. The world moves and shifts and changes. Roses slips upright, pulling me to my feet and tugs me towards the bed.

“Um, Rose?”

“What? We’ve shared a bed before.”

“Not... not like *this*.”

Her grin is pure mischief. “I should hope not,” she says.

She lies down, arching backwards, pulling me on top of her. She guides my fingers to the fabric of her gown and helps me peel it away. I’m trembling with nervous energy.

“Are you sure?”

Her mouth covers mine, her hands sliding under my shirt, across my belly. I moan into her mouth.

“I’m sure,” she says. “Are you?”

“Yes.” My voice is no longer my own. “Yes. Absolutely.”

Slowly, gently, we peel back the layers of cloth dividing the two of us. The slightest touch of her flesh on mine makes me sing. Her warmth spreads through me. I kiss her neck, long and lingering, following the curve of her body. Her fingers graze along my back, gliding down the shape of me, feeling me in places I never knew existed. She pulls my face back to hers and tugs my body so that it covers her completely, and then she kisses me so deeply I feel like I’m drowning. I am utterly surrendered to sensation.

Afterwards, we lie in the candlelight, tracing new parts of our bodies. We whisper to each other, holding each other until the candles have worn away to stubs and faint traces of dawn glitter along the horizon. Rose lies her head against my chest, gazing up at me.

I watch her watching me, in the low light of the fire, light flickering across her face, her hair, the curve of her back. The smile has not left her face. I am not used to this. Did she always look at me this way, with such simplicity and joy and strange, wondrous longing? It is the look I have worn beneath my fur every time I gazed at her.

I want to tell her that she’s beautiful, that I love her. I want to write a poem to press this moment into history.

But in the end, there is only one thing I really need to say.

Rose opens her mouth at the exact time I do.

“Will you marry me?” we both ask.

Neither one of us says yes. We laugh instead, and begin kissing again in earnest.



We are married within the month, but the night before our wedding is the only time we are ever apart. I gained two bodies in returning to this form, Rose is so much a part of my very flesh. It takes some getting used to, but she is there to help me, and to show me delights I never knew before.

I find a moment to tell her about Grace visiting my dreams, and she does not cry, but holds me and whispers thanks that her mother never truly left her.

Neither of us ever lose ourselves to grief again.

Meeting the rest of her family, and getting to know them, is an interesting affair. Freedom remains guiltily wary of me for a little while, but the night before the wedding, while Rose is ensconced in her room with her sisters and the fairies, he and Charles arrive at my door with whiskey and cigars. I find both to be perfectly horrid, but Charles and Freedom are excellent company.

"I daresay marriage to Rose isn't going to be easy," Freedom slurs at one point, "but good luck regardless. My sister is not easy to live with."

"Honour is a delight," says Charles defensively.

"Honour *can* be a delight," Freedom concurs. "But Rose isn't."

"I think Rose is a delight."

Freedom groans. "She has a terrible temper."

"I'm aware. I still think she's a delight."

"You're both as bad as each other."

Charles claps him on the back. "You'll find out one day, old chap."

"I sincerely hope not."

Rose starts to forgive him after the wedding, and he becomes a frequent visitor, eventually moving in and installing himself as 'captain of the guard'. He spends a lot of time painting for someone supposed to be a guard, and Ariel, meanwhile, develops a sudden interest in this past time. We become fast friends. It is hard not to grow to love someone who loves Rose almost as much as I do, especially when he offers you private painting lessons and teaches you how to fight with a sword.

Honour, naturally, *is* a delight from the start, embracing me the first time we meet and proudly presenting her child as my nephew. I love them both immediately, and soon come to think of her very much as my own sister. She and Charles are frequent visitors. Hope is harder to win over, but giving her free rein of the library helps, and although Beau is a little disappointed that I am no longer a beast, he is eventually won over too.

Rose's father is a more difficult case. He is not the most talkative of people, and it is clear that he blames me, at least a little, for removing his daughter from his care. We have, however, a shared love of Grace, and when I tell him about her and what she did for me, and take him to the mirrors to see her again, he begins to come around.

I will not pretend that Rose and I never fought again. We still have our arguments, our secrets, our fights and our make-ups. Sometimes we yell at each other, "I didn't actually agree to marry you, you know!" and Rose once yelled that she was very glad she didn't give up her family for me because she was going off to stay with them. She gets halfway there and turns back, declaring that she left me once and has no intention of ever doing so again.

We drive each other spare sometimes, and Rose often declares exasperatedly that the only thing worse than living with me is living without me. Our disagreements are always short, and we more than make up for them.

For the first few years after our marriage, it is just the three of us; Rose, myself, and Bramble. Rose declares she likes it this way, and we take certain preventative measures to keep it so for a while. We travel, we explore, we adventure. We do everything, together.

One day, I wake to find our bed half-full. I find her on the roof terrace, face shining in the early morning sun. She is gazing out at the grounds. "Are you ready for another journey?" she asks me.

"Where are we going?"

"Nowhere, this time," she smiles secretly, and takes my hand. She places it against her stomach. "But it will be a journey nonetheless."

The joy of that moment is eclipsed only by the feeling of holding our daughter in my arms for the first time, when I feel divided and doubled all at once. Moments after she is born, everyone leaves the three of us alone, and we lie together on the bed, completely stunned by the fact this person exists who is a part of us both, and that there are now three where two used to be.

I expect nothing to eclipse the magnificence of that moment, and yet it grows every time we add to our family. Briar, Grace, Leo and Liberty.

I could not have imagined this, the day we met. I could never have foreseen a bliss like this would ever await us. Rose walked into the castle and gave it life, made it a home, gave me a family. No magic compares to the beauty of the world we make together. Our kisses may not always feel like fireworks, and surely as the sun, flames turn to embers over the years. Seasons pass, years turn into decades, and we weather every storm that comes our way. We endure. We quietly triumph. We burn.

One day, after we have left this world, I know my mother plans to close the gate, possibly forever. We will be forgotten by the world of men, pass into the castle's history, dissolve into dust. But we live gloriously whilst we can. We tell our story to our children, to our nephews and nieces, to our grandchildren and great-children and to all those that come to share our home.

"It began in winter," I always start. "When a Thorn fell in love with a Rose..."

The End.



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If you want to learn more about my upcoming projects, please follow me on Twitter @KateMacAuthor.

About The Author

Katherine Macdonald



Born and raised in Redditch, Worcestershire, to a couple of kick-ass parents, Katherine "Kate" Macdonald often bemoaned the fact that she would never be a successful author as "the key to good writing is an unhappy childhood".

Since her youth, Macdonald has always been a storyteller, inventing fantastically long and complicated tales to entertain her younger sister with on long drives. Some of these were written down, and others have been lost to the ethers of time somewhere along the A303.

With a degree in creative writing and six years of teaching English under her belt, Macdonald thinks there's a slight possibility she might actually be able to write. She may be very wrong.

She lives in Kent with her manic toddler and two cats: Admiral Roe and Captain Haddock.

"Heart of Thorns" is her eight novel.

You can follow her at @KateMacAuthor.

Other Books by this Author:
The Phoenix Project Trilogy

Book I: Flight
Book II: Resurrection
Book III: Rebirth



In the "Fairy Tales Retold" series:

Kingdom of Thorns: A Sleeping Beauty Retelling
The Barnyard Princess: A Frog Prince Retelling
A Tale of Ice and Ash: A Snow White Retelling
The Rose and the Thorn: A Beauty and the Beast Retelling

Coming Soon:

A Song of Sea and Shore: A Little Mermaid Retelling
March 2021

Sneak Peek:

A Song of Sea and Shore: A Little Mermaid Retelling

Prologue

He longed for the sea.

It was a strange, foolish longing. The sea was right there outside his window. It had been with him since the day of his birth. He often slept with the curtains open in the warmer months, just so the first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was the glistening sheet of swirling grey, cerulean, azure, silver.

He gazed at the sea like he expected it to come to him, and when he went to the shore, when he waded into the water and held out his hand, it was almost with the expectation of something taking it. He was waiting for the sea to greet him back, to rise up to his outstretched fingers and take his hand in its.

Foolish, foolish. The sea had no hand to hold.

But he still swore sometimes, when the wind picked up a southerly breeze and drifted into his room, he could hear a ghost of a voice. That longing inside tugged at him again, like the promise of something made long ago, rubbed to a sliver by the waves of the sea, no more than a small polished pebble. He could almost feel the weight of it against his palm.

I hear you, I hear you, I am coming.

Chapter One: The Little Mermaid

I lay at the bottom of the ocean, facing upwards towards the faint glimmer of sun, shafts of light casting dappled shadows on my pale body. My skin was almost as white as a moonbeam, my blue scales shimmering iridescently in the weak light. I stretched out, trying to soak up the little warmth I could. I had been captivated by the sun since I was seven, and my sisters and I went to spend a summer on the land while Mother negotiated a treaty with the king there. A single summer, and the memory of unfiltered sunlight has always stayed with me.

As well as other things.

Most of the feelings had faded over time, but even now, I had never forgotten the sensation of hot sand between the toes I had temporarily occupied.

That was before Ondine was killed, before the treaty was broken, before the land folk sailed their boats into forbidden waters and our mother forbade all contact with the world above.

My remaining sisters acted like the surface world was a dream we shared, something that had faded to mist long ago. They were all older than me, and yet it was my memories that remained as hard and sharp as flint, as indivisible as the sea itself.

I wondered if the people above had forgotten about us, too. If they whispered of mermaids as if they were no more than rumours.

More than anything, I wondered what Kai thought, if he ever stared out to sea like I stared up to shore, and thought about me with the same kind of longing. We might only have been children when we met, but I'd never managed to scrape him or his heavy world from my mind. Sometimes I dreamed of sandcastles on the beach, dancing in the foam, and music. Mermaids had their voices, to be sure, but music on land... music there was the gateway to everything. It could be fire one moment and water the next. It could be heavy and light in the same breath. I had never heard music like that, not in ten long years, though he frequently strummed

through my mind as clearly as the day we parted.

“Neri... Nerina...” a sing-song voice called. Selene, my second-oldest sister, appeared above the coral, her pale gold hair floating around her heart-shaped face. “There you are!” Selene’s mouth moved, but her voice reached through my mind. This was how Mer communicated. It had been a great surprise to me when I had visited the land and realised that humans didn’t speak that way. Our ‘soft telepathy’ as Mother called it meant we could understand what they said, but it took us a while to learn to speak their tongue with our mouths.

“What are you doing?” Selene asked.

“Dreaming,” I told her.

“Nice dream?”

“The loveliest.”

Selene reached out and pinched my nose, as if I were seven, not seventeen. “Strange child.”

“I am no child.” A foolish response. The youngest of six, I would always be a child in their eyes. Only Ondine never babied me.

“Strange *girl*, then.” Selene smiled, shaking her head. “Come home. There are ships about. Mother—”

“Will be furious, yes.”

“She is only trying to keep us safe, Neri.”

Six years ago, Ondine had been killed in an accident, her broken body snatched from us and lifted above a fishing vessel. It had cemented our mother’s belief in innate wickedness of the land folk. I loved my sister. I missed her. But it had been an accident. She was trying to free a dolphin trapped in a fisherman’s net. I did not think the humans knew what was attacking their haul when they hurled down their spears and defended it. They hadn’t even been in the forbidden waters. The treaty was broken afterwards.

A chill bristled through the current. We shivered, knowing its source.

“Mother,” Selene breathed. “Come. Let us return.”



We swam back as quickly as we could, through the darkening sea and the withering current. The palace, carved out of the reef, rose to greet us. It was not as large as the castle of the human kingdom, not by half, and large parts were open entirely to the elements. Only our sleeping quarters were contained, protected from the colder currents by windows of crystal.

Guards were posted at most of the entrances, but they parted ways when they saw us approach. Two of Mother’s consorts ushered us into the throne room.

My sisters were arranged in the dining area, a large oval cut in the centre of the room. For the most part, there was a family resemblance between the five of us. We all had bluish, silvery, iridescent tails, most of us had white-gold hair, tinged occasionally with another colour, like mine was with blue. Four of us had pale skin, almost clear. Only our eldest sister, Pearl, differed in this regard. Her skin was dark and her hair an inky blue-black. Her father was our mother’s first consort, Oshun, from the Kingdom of Kalimar. He was my favourite stepfather.

The females of our species outnumbered the men greatly. It had always been so. As such, it was traditional for the Mer Queen to take on several consorts, as a show of power. Mother had three at the moment. Oshun, her first, Zale, her second, and Bosun, her third. Although technically any one of them could have sired me, it was unlikely to be Oshun. I hoped it wasn’t Zale.

Although men could rule, it was uncommon. Supposedly they would have kept a harem too, but the last king was so long ago I hadn't really thought of it. Mer could live for some three hundred years, and as there was only one man for even five women... kings were not the norm.

It was not so on land. Their world was so different from ours. I remembered being shocked by the number of men when I first visited, and dazzled by the hair that sprouted from their chins. The ladies and gentlemen dressed differently too. Not just from us, but from each other. The women tended to wear great flowing garments in colours I couldn't name, and the men wore slimmer contraptions that wrapped around their legs. There were some exceptions depending on job roles and preferences, but we all dressed identically here, decorating our torsos with netting, shells, starfish, armour. We draped our bodies with necklaces of coral and pearl, adorned our tails with gems, pierced our fins with sea-jewels. Sometimes we wore half-skirts around our hips. Oshun did. It was a custom of his people, for the Kalimars were unique among the Merfolk. They had a kingdom under the sea, yes, but they also ruled a series of small desert islands, and were able to shift between legs and a tail at will. It was considered very ill-form to go naked from the waist-down on legs. Perhaps that's why humans were so covered.

Mother breezed into the room, sucking all sound from it, and drifted towards her throne. It was carved from the bones of a great sea monster one of her ancestors had bested centuries ago, and was pure white and minimally embellished. Mother more than made up for this. She dripped with pearls from her shoulders to her fins, her entire torso covered in golden shells. A heavy crown sat atop her shining head, and her yellow hair was cut unfashionably short, as if to say she had no need for further adornment.

She tapped her fingers on the arm of her chair. The final finger of her right hand was made of bone and pearl and gold, a replacement for the one she lost in battle many years before any of us were born.

"Daughters," she said, surveying us more like we too were objects that she owned, extensions of her decorations. "I am glad to see you all safe. Another vessel has entered our waters."

"Are we to retaliate?" asked Pearl. I could never work out if my oldest sister longed for battle or if she merely wished to please Mother with her brutality. She was always the first to volunteer for a fight.

Mother waved her hand. "It is but one vessel. I shall send a storm as a warning. Let the survivors think twice before breaking their promise again."

"They do it too frequently," said Zale from the side. He was one of Mother's generals, as well as her consort. He was my least favourite, cold and brutal and eager to please. "We ought to attack the shore directly. Just enough to remind them of our real power. The attacks on the ships aren't public enough. People need to see what you can do."

Mother rested her head against her hand. "I have been considering such a thing," she admitted. "Perhaps—"

"No!" The scream left my mind before I could stop it. In a second, I was the victim of every eye in the room.

Mother's eyes were the darkest. "Forgive me, youngest daughter, but what was that?"

I shrank in my spot. "I... I only... have we considered maybe... talking to them? Reminding them of the treaty in words?"

Zale snorted. "The treaty *was* our attempt to reason with them," he hissed. "We have tried words before. The humans think nothing of a promise. They are not like

us. They lie and manipulate—”

I had never thought this to be a uniquely human trait. It was true that Mer held lying as much more unforgivable, and that we could make bargains that would result in order immediate death should we break them, but the humans I had met were like us in their hearts, could be swayed to kindness or cruelty depending on the tide.

“Please, Mother,” I begged. “Let us try once more to reason with them—”

“You cannot reason with a serpent!” Mother snapped. “You were there the day your sister died. Did she try speaking to them?”

She did.

“Did they listen to her cries?”

They did not.

“They... they couldn’t hear her...”

“Because they refuse to listen!” Mother rose from her seat. The waters in the room grew cold and fierce. The light seemed darker, as dark as Mother’s eyes. “Why would you defend the monsters who took your sister’s life?”

“Because,” I said, “I don’t think they can all be monsters.”

From her space beside the table, Pearl groaned. “She’s still thinking of that summer we spent there ten years ago! Oh, come on, Neri. You were a child. How much do you really know about them?”

I knew that Kai’s nurse sang us lullabies almost every night, that his mother would read to us, that the servants used to sneak us up bits of raw fish when we were homesick. I knew that once, when I was climbing on the rocks beside the shore, I slipped and fell, and Kai wrapped up my knee himself and helped me hobble back to the castle. I knew that whatever evil they were capable of, whatever carelessness, they were just as capable of kindness, and for that reason alone I would defend them until I was no more than foam on the sea.

“You were a child,” sniffed Zale. “You are a child still. You do not see the world through our eyes.”

“Good!” I scowled at him, wishing I had some kind of power, some way of hurting him without touching him, like Mother or Pearl. “Your eyes are as black as your hearts! Why would I ever, ever want to look at someone, and think I wanted to murder them?”

“Nerina, hold your words, or I will take them from you,” Mother said darkly. I shuddered, shrinking backwards, my eyes wide, and a fraction of the darkness in her ebbed away. “Your compassion does you credit, my child, but Zale is right. You are young. There are things about the world you do not understand.”

“But—”

“Would you have me lose another child?” she hissed. “Look at your sisters, Nerina! Which one do you pick?”

I couldn’t look, although Zale made a move as though to force me. Mother held up a hand.

“I... I’d like to be dismissed now, if I may,” I said faintly, staring at the floor.

My mother nodded, and I swept out of the room and up into the bower where my sisters and I slept in six enormous clam-beds. I swam into mine and closed the lid. My eyes quickly adjusted to the gloom, aided by the glowing crystals I’d embedded in the roof. I’d arranged them in the pattern of the constellations, so I could sleep looking up at them, like I did on land. Kai thought it was strange, could not see the beauty in those specks of light, so normal to him. But I loved their cold fire, loved the glittering light in the dark.

I wondered if the vessel housed humans who were looking up at the real sky, not knowing it would be the last time they ever saw it.

Some of them were going to die.

But must they?

If... if I could get to the boat first, I could warn them. I could let them know of Mother's plans. Perhaps I could even ask them why they were ignoring the treaty. No one had tried to ask.

I might not get an answer that I liked, but I might also save their lives, which is all I wanted. Or maybe I'd see this famed cruelty, and I could finally sleep easily at night and let Mother do whatever she wanted with them.

Before I could act on my impulse, I heard a voice calling out to me, deep and soft.

"Neri? Are you here?"

Oshun.

I felt a shift in the water as he drifted closer to my clam.

"Are you all right?"

"I don't want Mother to sink the ship," I told him. "I don't think it's right."

Oshun sighed. "You must not be too hard on your mother. She does what she does out of love. To protect you. To protect her people."

I did not respond, but it occurred to me that people could do horrible things out of love. I was not sure that made it all right.

"Neri?"

"I'm fine," I whispered back. "I just want to... I think I'd like to be alone, now."

I think he might have stretched out a hand, but I couldn't be sure. I sunk my head into my sponge pillow, and waited until I was sure he was gone.

Then I got up, closed the lid fast behind me, and drifted into the corridor.

I wouldn't let Mother hurt the humans, not if there was anything I could do to stop it.